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FESSION AS A MEANS OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

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CONFESSION AS A MEANS OF SPIRITUAL PROGRESS

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By

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PREFACE

Since the decree of Pope Pius X many books have been published on this subject. But we have very little literature on the subject of frequent confession, although the Sacrament of Penance is now also received more frequently than formerly. There exists, therefore, a gap in our ascetical literature which this booklet is intended to fill.

It is not precisely a theological treatise, but purposes to expound the Catholic teaching regarding frequent confession and gives some practical directions for the application thereof. It was, of course, necessary to put these practical instructions on a solid theological basis, without entering too deeply into speculations.

By frequent or devotional confession is meant confession made often as a means of spiritual advancement rather than of absolution from mortal sins.

May the booklet arouse a desire for greater and more rapid progress in holiness, and may it assist all in smoothing the way to Christ in holy Communion.

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CHAPTER I

VENIAL SIN

THE great guilt of the world and the dread calamity of mankind is mortal sin. But why is it that souls nowhere on earth attain true beauty and happiness in unmarred perfection? That is a result of venial sin.

Sin, according to St. Augustine, is a word, a deed or a desire which is contrary to the divine law. The Catechism defines it in similar terms: Sin is a wilful violation of the law of God. We have here a clear setting forth of the true nature of every sin, to whatever class or type it may belong.

A man may be dominated by passion; he may be swayed by ill-regulated fear, or carried off by unlawful love. If under such influence he chooses, of his own free will, with full knowledge and consent, to do what is against the divine law, or fails to do what is commanded by it; he is guilty of wrongdoing; he sins against God, his Creator and Sovereign Lord, who has an inviolable right upon his obedience and service.

If a man knowingly and willingly transgresses God's law in an important matter, if he desires or enjoys a thing, the possession and enjoyment of which cannot go hand in hand with the possession and love of God—then he has done a grievous wrong, he has committed a mortal sin. And not only has he in such a case violated the law; he has frustrated its very purpose. The purpose of all law is love. For this were we given the law, that in all our acts and omissions we steadfastly keep our face set towards God as our last end; that we remain united to God in the bond of love. For it is for God that we have been created, that He might have His honor and glory in us, and that we might find in Him alone our honor and final happiness. If, then, a man grievously transgresses a commandment of God, he turns in such wise towards the creature as to rob God of the honor of being the last end of man's desiring and striving. By this act man cuts himself off from God and from Love—setting at naught the law; he has with it set at naught the purpose of the law; surrendering himself to the creature, he has deprived himself of his Creator.

Now, the wickedness of mortal sin is enormous and many-sided. Mortal sin is a grievous wrong committed against the Supreme Master and Sovereign Lord; it is an outrage in which the creature

defies its Creator and refuses Him obedience. Mortal sin, moreover, heaps a special ignominy on God in that it is a perversion of the right order established by Him in Heaven and on earth. For God must needs hold supreme dominion over all beings which He has called into existence; this is His most sacred and unimpeachable right. But the sinner, face to face with the choice between God and wickedness, between the Highest Good and a creature of nothingness, turns his back on God and gives his preference to a created thing. What scorn and contempt for God such action holds! In addition, what black ingratitude is contained in every mortal sin—ingratitude against One whose benefactions are beyond measure and number! What heartlessness against the dearest of fathers, the most loving of friends! Who, then, can gauge the heinousness of even one mortal sin? and where is there an outrage that can equal in wantonness even its least degree?

In keeping with the enormity of grievous sin are its frightful consequences. The first of these is the death of the soul. The moment a mortal sin is committed, the supernatural life of the soul perishes; the structure of spiritual grace and virtue comes crashing in a heap; the bright light of the Holy Spirit is quenched, and the dread night of spiritual

death envelops the soul. All this becomes clear when we remember that God is the life of the soul. When He leaves a soul, naught remains but the vast yawning void of death, with the might of the powers of darkness rising out of the midst thereof. Then there is the awful penalty of mortal sin—eternal damnation. If the sinner continues rebellious to the end of his life, and steps into the Divine Presence with his will still obstinately turned against God; then that separation—deliberately sought, abetted, and maintained in life—becomes an unalterably fixed state, a condition that will last throughout eternity. That is hell, the acme of agony. The soul of man can sense this while yet in the flesh, for man knows that God is the Truth, whence every spirit draws its life; that God is Love, with the joy and thrill of which each human heart would fain be throbbing; that God is Beauty, uncreated and imperishable, towards which, with elemental though oft unconscious force, every impulse drives the heart of man. True, while he still treads this earth, the sinner is less sensibly affected by this loss and separation. He does not really know God; he fails to grasp how sweet the Lord is: small wonder that the immensity of his loss remains hidden from him. The thirst of his soul for the supremely Perfect and the incomparably Beautiful, he may pretend to slake, during

life's short span, with earthly phantoms and empty counterfeits. But what when Death comes to lay him low; when all the bright world round about him wanes and fades into stark night and nothingness, and he is thrust into vast, unknown eternity—solitary, alone—alone with his God! Then, suddenly, what a staggering realization of what he lost when he foreswore God! The splendor of Christ's Divinity, all ablaze in the human nature of the Saviour-Judge, will show forth the thrilling beauty of Him who was to be his soul's supreme blessedness. And then shall rise in that soul a very agony of yearning for the possession of that Supreme Good; yet a yearning warped by an implacable hatred that shall not be allayed for all the endless ages, but shall cause to start in the doomed soul cut off from God, a fountain of fiery torment that will know no hope of change or surcease.

A reasonably large share of the faithful ordinarily succeed, with the aid of God's grace, in keeping the monstrous evil of mortal sin out of their lives. But in the matter of venial sin they are not so fortunate. While we walk this earth, no one, be he ever so far advanced on the road to perfection, can boast complete immunity from ordinary daily offenses. So excessive indeed is our weakness and so manifold the perverseness of our nature, that, in spite of all

the graces showered upon us and in spite of our good will, we stumble ever and anon—at least momentarily and in minor matters.

Venial sin is related to mortal sin; but different in kind. Like mortal sin, it arises from the transgression of a divine law. For "where there is no law," says St. Paul, "neither is there transgression" (Rom. IV, 15). Where there is question merely of an evangelical counsel or a good work not of precept, there can be no question of sin. This is a point of great practical importance. Men often regard as sinful what is no sin, because there is no commandment. A few examples will illustrate what I mean. A jocose lie is a sin because there is a law which prescribes: "Be not willing to make any manner of lie: for the custom thereof is not good" (Ecclus. VII, 14). Deliberate distractions in prayer are venial sins, for God commands: "Before prayer prepare thy soul: and be not as a man that tempteth God" (Ecclus. XVIII, 23). Taking what is not our own is a sin, for the Seventh Commandment leaves no escape in its comprehensive injunction: "Thou shalt not steal." Totally to neglect daily prayer is a sin, for the Lord's bidding: "Pray always," has from time immemorial been understood in the sense of the Church's custom of raising the heart to God thrice a day. To miss a part of Holy Mass on Sun-

day is a sin, for the Church's precept stipulates the entire divine sacrifice. On the other hand, to fail to hear Mass on weekdays is not a sin. Devout attendance at Holy Mass is indeed always a very good work, but command to attend weekday Mass we have none. To neglect the recital of the Rosary is no sin, for there is neither divine commandment nor Church precept enjoining its recital. The same is to be said of all prayers prescribed by societies and confraternities for their members; hence their omission entails no sin. In all such matters pretty much the same relation obtains as with regard to virginity and marriage. The state of virginity is without doubt more perfect than that of matrimony. And yet it is clear that he that sacrifices virginity for wedlock is fully within his rights and sins not. Even the best of good works, no matter how holy, may be left undone without guilt, so long as no law obliges to its performance.

Thus, while venial sin resembles mortal sin in that both are an act or omission contrary to the law of God; in point of opposition or antagonism to that divine law, mortal sin is vastly more grievous. The chief difference between them lies in the fact that venial sin indeed violates the law, but does not frustrate its purpose, which is love: it leaves love in possession, and hence does not render

the law ineffective. For he that sins venially does not on that account cease to regard God as his last end and to love Him above all things. There is not, then, in venial sin that frightful injustice that would dethrone God and put Him beneath the creature; nor does this sin cause God to depart from the soul, withdraw from it every vestige of sanctifying grace, and sentence it to eternal damnation. The name *sin* is common to both venial and mortal offenses; their nature, however, is altogether diverse.

The fact that venial sin is not forbidden under penalty of the loss of God, is due to the smallness of the matter involved. There have been heretics who contended that all sins are equally grievous and all have the same dire effect of severing the soul from God. But this opinion is at variance with the judgment of reason and the teaching of Holy Scripture. No mother in her senses will drive her child from her because of a minor offense against obedience; no sane man will allow a slight fault, say of neglect, to convert a friendship of many years into hatred; no lawgiver ever took it into his head to prescribe the death penalty for a slight misdemeanor. The common law of reason and humanity demands that it be so. And whence is this law, if not from the Author of human nature! And surely it were irreconcilable with the justice and goodness of God

that, for an inconsiderable human wrongdoing, He should inflict a punishment which would be altogether out of proportion to the guilt. In complete harmony with this teaching is the word of Holy Scripture, that there is "a sin of the just," that is to say, a sin which a just man may fall into, without ceasing to be just. In the same sense are the words of St. James: "In many things we all offend" (III, 2). The beloved disciple confesses of himself, as of all the faithful: "If we say that we have not sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us" (I Jno. I, 8). Lastly, the Saviour teaches all His followers, the just together with the unjust, to pray daily: "Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us."

Venial sin does not, then, alienate the just from God; it does not quench the flame of love, and it does not destroy the soul's supernatural life of grace. Nevertheless, it is a great wrong in the sight of God and works fearful mischief to the soul.

Inasmuch as it is a transgression of the divine law, venial sin is an act of disobedience against God, the Sovereign Master and Lord of man. Though in less serious matter, it ignores the displeasure it gives God and therefore is truly an injury to the Highest and Most Lovable Good. Against the most generous Benefactor, for whom it has only indiffer-

ence for countless splendid gifts, venial sin is a mean and hateful ingratitude. What a sad defaulting of love from God, truest Friend and Lover of our soul, whose gracious, condescending wooing the senseless human heart foils by cleaving inordinately to the creature! [1]

These are fundamental truths of our faith. We have not indeed at any time doubted them; yet, alas! how feeble and ineffectual is their power over us, how little do we realize their vital significance! Indifferent and unmoved the thought of the injury of our venial sins leaves us. We are painfully sensitive to the least personal injury; yet for the very real injury done to God by venial sin we seem to lack understanding. For every form of ungratefulness, by whomsoever offered or against whomsoever incurred, we have only horror and indignation. The poet's words, "Ingratitude, thou marble-hearted fiend," expresses a universal conviction. How is it, then, that only for the ingratitude towards God, the ingratitude of repaying the gifts of ineffable Good-

[1] This thought is strikingly developed in Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven":

"I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years. . . .
For, though I knew His love who followed,
Yet was I sore adread
Lest, having Him, I must have naught beside."

ness with the insult of sin, albeit venial—how is it that this brand of ingratitude alone leaves us callous and unashamed! We grieve sincerely when we have offended an earthly friend, even though the offense was but an accident. And yet the insults which our venial sins inflict upon God seem to have as little effect upon us, as if God meant nothing to us, and we, nothing to Him; He might well be non-existent as far as our concern for Him gives evidence. So sadly has our knowledge of the supernatural been impaired by original sin. So hard and insensible have we grown towards God by our long continued infidelities! O God, grant us the grace to grasp, with a living faith, the malice and hatefulness of venial sin, and to conceive a heartfelt sorrow for the same.

But if we are moved so little by the injury done to God, perhaps we may be more stirred by the grievous mischief venial sin brings upon our own souls. And truly, no one who has ever lived in a state of fervent love of God and has experienced the peace and happiness that go with it, can remain ignorant of the numberless inestimable treasures of the interior life that have perished through venial sin. This loss is an intimate, personal matter; it affects our self-love, and to that we are always sensitively responsive.

When a soul by mortal sin severs itself from God, the primal source of all life, it brings upon itself a dreadful cataclysm: together with God, love departs, grace vanishes, life ceases, beauty flees, happiness dies, and even hope is no more. Well for the soul if from the wreckage of all her gifts and glory possessed in her blessed state of a child of God, she has not totally lost her faith as well, so that by its help she may still save a chance of future spiritual rebirth!

Though not so appalling in its consequences, venial sin is yet sufficiently disastrous and frought with enough real danger that we do well to shrink from it with fear and dread.

First among the effects of venial sin is a lessening of divine love. St. Thomas of Aquin teaches that venial sin cannot diminish love in its essential nature, but he also insists, over and over again, that it weakens the ardor of love, its inner warmth and fervor. "Venial sin," he says, "is not opposed to love, but it is certainly opposed to the ardor of love." [1] Even after the commission of venial sin, love continues in the soul, giving it direction and tendency towards God. But the urgency which would cause love to strive mightily for that goal, has been impaired; the force by which it would spontane-

[1] *De Malo*, IX, vii, art. XI, ad 11.

ously gravitate towards God, the buoyancy that would unceasingly issue in acts of love, the sustained, ever alert readiness for every form of goodness pleasing to God—all these have been injured and crippled. "Venial sin does not destroy love, but it does destroy the ardor of love." The virtue of divine love remains, but its acts become labored, its operations, trammelled.

A consequence of this slackening of love is the slowing down of the inner life of grace. The impulse towards doing good grows weary, energy wanes, action comes to a standstill. One single venial sin, committed deliberately and not promptly repented of, is often sufficient to check the finest flowering of virtue and perfection. Immediately after such a sin we feel the action of our spirit growing weak and sluggish, we lack joy and agility in our efforts, and drag to a tedious and defective conclusion a work begun wearily and without heart.

Swiftest and most marked among the effects of venial sin on the soul are its reactions on our converse with God in prayer. It is there, most of all, that venial sin betrays itself as an obstacle to the action of love, a block and a barrier to progress in the life of grace. The free, childlike, joyous access to God in meditation is a privilege of the pure and of those who love. Venial sin brings restraint and

estrangement into this cordial relationship. Yes, there is a type of venial sin which raises an impenetrable wall between God and the praying soul, in such wise that all of the soul's exertions are unable to bring back to it the sensible experience of His nearness which it covets. A lessening of attraction towards God and trust in Him even in prayers of petition are other specific consequences of venial sin, when the soul remains deliberately attached to it. More especially when venial sin becomes habitual in daily life, do most lamentable effects manifest themselves: in place of the lightsomeness of former days, a pall of darkness settles down; callousness and listlessness enter where before were joyous intimacy and cordiality; the fountains of thought in prayer and meditation dry up; there is no more relish, no more apparent progress; nothing but a scant and stunted growth results, nothing but a laborious and painful service remains.

Furthermore, venial sin smudges the soul, blurs the bright beam of beauty which the soul was wont to radiate, and thus makes it grow less pleasing in the sight of its Creator. Still more disastrous are the effects of venial sin if it is indulged in frequently and repented of but rarely. The increasing number of minor transgressions of the divine commandments dulls the delicacy of conscience and so

does away with that fine sensitive perception of the spiritually attuned soul. Oft repeated sin finally hardens into a sinful habit. When inordinate inclination carries off victory after victory, it needs must follow that the whole complex of human appetites sinks to lower levels, and even the coarser passions are revived. In contrast, how supernaturally exalted and high above earth's lowliness, how pure of spirit and at once how ardent with love are the emotions of a soul which, united intimately with God, and splendid in its sinlessness, speeds steadily forward along the charmed heights of Christian perfection. Apart and almost wholly immune from the lure of the base and ignoble, sustained by a vivid realization of the life to come, it soars aloft beyond the reach of lust and worldly enticements. But let even a few deliberate infidelities creep in, and at once the soul will become painfully aware that the evil within is not wholly extinct; that the senses again exercise their sway over heart and will; that the emancipation from the wiles of concupiscence, so dearly bought, has once more been wrested from her.

One effect of venial sin should especially give us cause for concern. St. Augustine says: "When venial sins begin to accumulate, they so disfigure the beauty of the soul that they rob us of the em-

braces of our heavenly Spouse." [1] Clearly, he does not wish to maintain that venial sin causes a complete separation from God. But venial sin does loosen the bond of intimacy which unites the soul with God; it tends to disengage the soul from its Maker. Such a severing of union is, of course, not to be understood in a local sense; it means simply a lessening of the communication of Himself which God vouchsafes the soul. He gives Himself less than He did before the guilt of venial sin had been incurred. The nature of this communication finds expression in a prayer, which has received the approbation of the Church. It reads as follows: "O Jesus, who livest in Mary, come and live in Thy servants in the spirit of Thy holiness, in the fulness of Thy power, in the truth of Thy virtues, in the perfection of Thy ways, in the communication of Thy mysteries; rule in us over all the powers of the enemy, in the strength of Thy Spirit and for the glorification of Thy Father." This prayer, composed by a saint, clearly manifests the immense benefits that accrue to us if with a great fervor of love we seek after God; and on the other hand, how great a loss we sustain if, through remissness in our zeal, we oppose to the action of the Holy Spirit a barrier which oft-repeated venial sins call into being.

[1] *De Paenitentia*, sermo 351, 5.

In the end, long continued venial sin leads to mortal sin. If the soul remains lukewarm, if it persists in inflicting injury upon the life of grace, in abetting evil by yielding it new nourishment, in accustoming itself to transgression of the divine commandments; then the moment will not be far off when the spectre of mortal sin in the form of grievous temptation will put in its appearance. May the soul at least in that crisis be stirred to action by the horror which the nearness of the yawning abyss must strike into her, and may she then, in the realization of the dire consequences of venial sin, renounce forever her lukewarmness, lest she head straight and irreparably for the goal of all lukewarmness—mortal sin!

Finally, in the wake of venial sin follow temporal penalties which will have to be paid either in this present life or beyond the grave in Purgatory.

It is to be noted here that the serious consequences of venial sin are not so much the result of one detached fall, as St. Augustine and St. Thomas assure us, but rather the cumulative effect of a continually increasing number of sins. As long as venial sin remains an isolated act in the life of the soul, its consequences are not so harmful, more especially if it was the result of weakness rather than malice. And even though we fall frequently, as is the case

with most men, the injury will not be considerable if only the soul will promptly enter into itself and purge away the guilt. Hence our great concern should be to struggle against relapses into venial sin, against the danger of continuing in the same.

It is a pity that too few of the faithful show any real anxiety over their daily failings. Many indeed commit them with a levity and carelessness as though nothing depended on it, either in Heaven above or on earth below. And what is worse, not only do they heap guilt upon guilt, but they do next to nothing to offer God satisfaction for all these sins. How altogether differently we would think of these "little" sins, and how carefully we would guard against them, if we allowed ourselves to be guided by a living faith and to be actuated by the motive power of love. The saints of God have dreaded venial sin more than death; they bewailed these sins as a dreadful calamity; they expiated them with a severity so unsparing and ruthless as to appear altogether inordinate to us—to us who so sadly fail to understand. For who is there that would venture to assert that the saints have exaggerated the malice of venial sin; that they have tortured themselves bootlessly when they undertook the burden of a life-long penance for supposedly trifling failings? No, the difference between the conception which the

saints have of venial sin as compared to that which we hold, consists altogether in the fact that the Spirit of God is living and active in their souls, whilst in ours His breath has all but dwindled down to the stillness of the tomb. For this reason it is that they have grasped the injury and the evil that lurks in venial sin, and that is hidden from our eyes.

CHAPTER II

THE FORGIVENESS OF VENIAL SIN OUTSIDE OF CONFESSION

THE contemplation of the wrongness and the evil consequences of venial sin must awaken in every Catholic who desires to remain steadfast and make progress in virtue, the following two resolutions: (1) I will carefully avoid venial sins, especially those committed voluntarily; and (2) I will as soon as possible correct the faults which I may fall into. The first of these resolutions is intended to prevent our life from becoming an unbroken series of faults. But this alone is not sufficient. Because no matter how vigilant and determined we may be, a time will come when our vigilance will slacken or our strength fail. Then the will, which was so sincere in its endeavors, will become the victim of our perverse inclinations and a misstep will be made before we are aware of it. We shall sin again and again, although, with the help of God, less frequently and less grievously. But when the evil has penetrated the soul, it must by all means be cast out at once. When atoned for

promptly, venial sin will not do serious damage; it becomes destructive only when, unatoned, it continues to fester in the soul.

Many, alas, are careless in ridding themselves of venial sin as soon as possible. Some do not care, others labor under the impression that this can be done only by confession. That is a mistake. There are many ways of blotting out venial sin.

Generally speaking, we may say regarding the forgiveness of sin and its guilt, that guilt incurred by sin will not be forgiven without repentance. This repentance may be of various kinds.

When the sinner expressly renounces sin by an act of contrition and a firm purpose of amendment, we call this formal and direct repentance. When, on the other hand, without thinking of his sins, he returns to God with a more intense love than before, determined to please Him in all things, we call this indirect repentance, because it implies a hatred of sin. We may also speak of a virtual repentance, when the sinner performs good works in a truly penitential spirit, or when he offers up to God good works in a genuinely repentant spirit. This personal repentance becomes a Sacrament by confession and absolution.

Venial sin may, therefore, be blotted out in three different ways: first, by direct and formal repen-

tance, without the Sacrament of Penance; secondly, by indirect and virtual repentance, also without the Sacrament; thirdly, by means of the Sacrament of Penance.

From this it follows that confession is only one of a number of ways by which forgiveness of our faults can be obtained, and that it is not absolutely necessary for this purpose. To convince ourselves of this fact we need only to glance at the teaching of the Catholic Church in all ages and at the penitential practice of the early Christian centuries.

The Council of Trent says plainly and tersely: "Venial sins may without guilt be omitted in confession and expiated by a variety of other means." [1] The Catechism of the Council of Trent re-echoes these words.

The definition of Trent is corroborated by the penitential discipline of the primitive Church and by the writings of the Fathers. In the first four (according to some in the first seven) centuries it was the universal practice to administer the Sacrament of Penance only in cases of mortal sin. In those days many Christians, after having received the cleansing waters of Baptism and having their souls wonderfully strengthened by Holy Communion, led a life free from mortal sin, and hence a large number

[1] Sess. XIV, c. 5, *De confessione.*

of them never had an occasion to receive the Sacrament of Penance. But how could they rid themselves of their petty sins if these can be forgiven only through the Sacrament? For the early Christians were not free from daily faults, no more than we are. St. Augustine in his book "Against Two Letters of the Pelagians (I, c. 14) says: "Many Christians after Baptism lead a life without grievous sin; but this does not mean that any one is without fault in his life." All of these, including SS. Cyprian, Ambrose, Augustine, and Jerome never went to confession. They knew of other ways and means to obtain forgiveness of venial sins. What were these means? Listen to what the bishops and shepherds of the olden time say on this head.

St. Gregory in his sixth letter on Penance says of the lesser sins of greed: "The Fathers in their regulations for penance pass over these sins, and therefore we deem it sufficient to heal them by the *word of preaching!*" St. Augustine says of the penitents (*De Symbolo*, VII, 51): "If their sins were slight, it was enough to expiate them by *daily prayer.*" St. John Cassian instructs his monks as follows: "Venial sins are blotted out by the *daily grace of Christ*, which Our Lord will give us at any moment for the forgiveness of sins." (*Coll.*, 23.) These passages could easily be multiplied.

As a result, the custom of preparing for Holy Communion by confessing venial sins was unknown to the Fathers. St. Augustine insisted that the Christians approach the table of the Lord with a clean heart, and, if possible, free from venial sins. Nevertheless he gives them no other advice but this: "If you have sins on your conscience, as long as they are not mortal sins, do not hesitate to come! But be careful first to pray: 'Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us.' If you forgive, you will be forgiven. Come, therefore, it is food for you, not poison." (*Tract. in Ioa.*, 26.)

This teaching is based on the nature of venial sin. Venial sin weakens, but it does not destroy, the supernatural life of the soul. Sanctifying grace remains in us even after we have committed venial sin, and as long as we possess it, we can be justified from within. As a tree heals light bruises and replaces broken branches as long as trunk and roots remain intact, so a man, in whom the root of all supernatural growth, *i. e.*, sanctifying grace, remains alive, with the help of grace is capable of repairing the slight daily injuries which the soul receives in its warfare against evil. Sanctifying grace continually produces supernatural acts of charity and good, meritorious works. These the soul can offer to God in expiation of the offenses committed

against Him. And since the soul is still a child of God and in her renewed love approaches the Father with a prayer of forgiveness, there is no doubt that her penance and prayer will be heard at once. Therefore, Our Lord commanded us to pray daily: "Forgive us our trespasses"—as if He would say: You commit faults every day and constantly need mercy; but this mercy will not be wanting to those who abide in me. Therefore, pray, humbly and contritely, and you will receive forgiveness of your faults.

Hence confession is by no means necessary to obtain the remission of venial sins. The Church herself advises the faithful to employ other means besides confession, means which are in every respect just as effective, and which are at any rate quicker and handier. Catholics ought to have a better knowledge of these means and use them more frequently. Since their number is great, we will mention here only the most important.

The first means of obliterating venial sin is an act of perfect charity. According to St. Thomas (*De Malo*, qu. 7, art. 11), "the fervor of the love of God" is the means *par excellence* of expiating venial sins. Fervent charity, he says, and venial sin are directly opposed to each other. Whenever venial sin enters the soul, it diminishes the fervor of char-

ity; but where charity increases, sin recedes and disappears. Venial sins are fetters of charity; when charity begins to bestir itself with a strong impulse, these fetters are broken, love once more burns with its initial fervor, and God has no reason for further considering the guilt of venial sin. According to St. Thomas, therefore, whatever in any manner arouses the love of God, be it interiorly or exteriorly, naturally or supernaturally, by enlightening the reason or stirring the heart, is a means of expiating venial sins. How many such means are there which can arouse acts of the love of God in a believing mind and zealous heart! By meditation and prayer, by receiving the Sacraments, by using the sacramentals, by the operation of grace in the heart, and by the edification coming from others, charity renews itself. By all these means, therefore, we can obtain forgiveness of venial sins. In proportion to the intensity of the act of charity a greater number of faults are remitted. It is a universally accepted principle that the act of perfect charity takes away venial sins in proportion as it removes from the soul all voluntary attachment to sin. Whenever an act of charity is fervent enough to remove all attachment to a sin, it will also wipe out all guilt. What an exalted opinion the greatest of theologians, St. Thomas Aquinas, had of the purifying force of a

single act of charity, may be gathered from his declaration: "It is improbable that anyone, who is in the love of God and feels his end approaching, would not turn by an act of love to God, and against all his sins, including venial sins; and this suffices for the remission of all his venial sins, as far as guilt is concerned, and perhaps also as regards punishment, whenever the love is intense" (*l.c.*, qu. 7, art. 11).

This doctrine is quite comprehensible also from the human point of view. If a child has been disobedient to his parents in a small affair, and returns to them with renewed love and obedience, will the parents continually cast up to him these petty faults and demand a formal apology for them? Certainly not. We are children of God, and God is full of love and kindness towards us. But we are children who again and again commit faults. Will God bear resentment against us on account of our petty failings, often to a certain degree unavoidable, when we come back to Him with renewed zeal and love? Certainly not; for His paternal kindness is infinitely greater than the most tender love of parents. Venial sins, therefore, disappear as soon as the ardor of love blazes up anew in the heart. This blazing up of charity need not manifest itself in a formal act, but may appear in every good work done out of

love. The *act* of love operates most forcefully in union with the *works* of love.

For those who are in the state of grace it will not be difficult to elicit an act of perfect charity; for, according to the words of Holy Scripture, the charity of God is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost. As natural as breathing is to a living being, so easy is it for a faithful Catholic to elicit an act of perfect charity. All that is required is to exercise himself repeatedly in this practice.

On a par with perfect charity is perfect contrition, whose sole object is God, the most beautiful and most lovable good. Perfect contrition is nothing else but the perfect love of God contritely turning against the sins committed. It is capable of changing in a moment the greatest criminal into a just man; how much more will it be able to obliterate the stains of venial sin from our souls? An act of perfect contrition blots out all mortal sins, because its very nature excludes mortal sin. Its effect on venial sins is somewhat different. It first of all wipes out all venial sins to which it directly refers, *i. e.*, those of which the soul repents for the love of God. Perfect contrition even blots out *all* venial sins of which the soul is guilty, if it is strong enough to exclude all attachment to every venial sin. But if the sinner detests only the greater sins, but not the

lesser, then only the greater are remitted. The same may be said when the act of perfect contrition arises from a motive which refers only to certain kinds of faults. If I repent of lying for the specific reason that lies displease God, who is the eternal truth, only the sins of falsehood are remitted. If I repent of the sins against brotherly love from the consideration that brotherly love is a commandment which Christ has specially at heart, then the other venial sins are not necessarily also forgiven.

Most theologians teach that imperfect contrition suffices to wipe out venial sin, for the reason that it implies a turning away of the soul from the wrong it has committed, and a return to God, coupled with an express or implied petition for pardon. Although we are moved to take this step by solicitude for our own welfare, rather than by the love of God, we nevertheless find grace and forgiveness because we have renounced sin.

Our venial sins are furthermore blotted out by all works of penance which we perform or offer up to God with the intention of obtaining His pardon, for such works are based on an act or at least the intention of perfect or imperfect contrition, and hence they are the virtual penance spoken of above. Works of penance of this kind are: fasting, the patient endurance of trials sent by God, acts of self-denial or

mortification of the senses, the faithful performance of duty, etc.

Then there are good works which have no penitential character, but are offered to God with a penitential intent. By means of these, too, we may obtain remission of venial sins. If these works are coupled with strong charity, they need not even have a penitential intent. To this class of good works belong the spiritual and corporal works of mercy, especially almsgiving in every form. Sacred Scripture frequently praises the expiatory power of alms, which, of course, refers above all to venial sins.

Prayer for forgiveness also has a conciliatory and purifying effect. Christ Himself embodied a petition for the remission of sins into the "*Our Father.*" In doing so He must have had in mind above all the daily faults of the just. Now, when this or a similar petition comes from a heart that has previously rid itself of all voluntary attachment to sin, it will most assuredly be heard by God. On this point St. Cyprian beautifully says: "The Apostle John in his Epistle expresses two truths, namely, that we must pray for and that we shall obtain forgiveness of our sins when we ask for it. It is for this reason he calls the Lord faithful, because He who has told us to pray and has promised forgiveness of our sins, will forgive them whenever we ask Him

for this favor." (*De Orat. Dom.*, 22.) St. Augustine says: "If the transgressions of public sinners were but slight offenses, daily prayer would suffice for blotting them out." The Church makes abundant use of this means. Imbued with the sanctity of God, she never prays in His divine presence without first imploring Him to forgive the sins of her children. The Sacrifice of the Mass begins with the *"Confiteor"*; likewise the distribution of Holy Communion. In the recitation of the Breviary the petition for the forgiveness of sins is frequently repeated. Therefore we should never make a meditation, begin a long prayer, or receive a Sacrament without having asked God to forgive us our sins, in order that He may accept our devotion favorably.

"Forgive, and you will be forgiven"—with these words Our Lord himself opened for us a rich fountain of God's mercy. When St. Augustine admonishes the faithful to cleanse their souls of petty faults before receiving the Holy Eucharist, he tells them this only: "Do not forget to pray: 'Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.' If you forgive, you will obtain forgiveness." (*Tract. in Ioa.*, 26.)

The devout use of the sacramentals also effects the forgiveness of sins. Holy water may serve as an example. In blessing it the Church prays that it may

prove beneficial to the body and soul of the user. As the prayers of the Church are always heard when they refer to souls, we may justly assume that through the devout use of holy water the soul is stirred by grace to acts of love and contrition, which in turn effect the remission of sins.

An excellent means for the remission of venial sin is the Holy Eucharist, both as a food for the soul and as a sacrifice. The Catechism of the Council of Trent says: "It must not be doubted that the Holy Eucharist remits the lighter offenses, commonly called venial sins. Whatever losses the soul has sustained through concupiscence, by falling in unimportant matters, is restored by the Eucharist, which cancels the lesser sins, just as natural food restores and supplies the heat which is daily lost by the body. Justly, therefore, did St. Ambrose say of this heavenly Sacrament: 'This daily bread is eaten as a remedy for our daily infirmity.' Of course, this dictum is to be understood only of those sins to which the heart feels no deliberate attachment." Thus far the Roman Catechism. It clearly and plainly teaches that Holy Communion obliterates venial sin and at the same time indicates how this is done. As food restores the warmth of the body, so Holy Communion renews the warmth of the soul, *i. e.*, charity. By renewing the ardor of love, there-

fore, it blots out venial sins. The Roman Catechism thus confirms the view of St. Thomas, who holds that the ardor of love is the direct cause which ordinarily wipes out venial sin in the soul. Communion produces an increase of sanctifying grace and the renewal of charity by virtue of Christ's institution (*ex opere operato*), but the remission of sins it effects by means of the acts of charity which the recipient elicits in making his thanksgiving. Now, since the personal presence of Our Saviour incites the soul to many fervent and effective acts of contrition, love, and a firm purpose of amendment, it is evident that a single devout Communion obliterates most, if not all, venial sins in the soul. However, according to the Roman Catechism, the Holy Eucharist exercises this cleansing power only on condition that the soul no longer harbors a voluntary attachment to sin. Holy Communion blots out only those venial sins from which the soul consciously or unconsciously detaches itself. In proportion as deliberate attachment to sin remains, sin itself remains. But Holy Communion is an excellent remedy also for this disease. It helps us to get away from this attachment. In this sense the decree of Pius X on daily Communion says that daily Communion will inevitably, by degrees, free the soul from attachment to venial sins.

The Holy Eucharist cancels venial sins also as a sacrifice, but in a different manner. Whilst Communion takes away venial sins by increasing charity, the Sacrifice of the Mass obliterates them by its power of reconciling man to God. Moved to mercy by the blood of His Son, shed in this sacrifice, God grants the gifts of repentance and penitential zeal, and these in turn effect the remission of sins. This, however, refers only to the *guilt;* the *punishments* are remitted directly by the holy Sacrifice.

One of the most excellent means of obtaining forgiveness of sins, and of counteracting especially their enervating effects, is an act of the virtue directly opposed to the sin in question. This practice consists in making up our mind at once to repair the wrong we have done by an act of that virtue against which we have offended. If this act proceeds from supernatural motives, especially with a view to show God our sorrow for what has happened and to offer Him an adequate atonement, then it is capable of turning the evil consequences of sin into their contrary, converting poison into a healing balm. Whoever makes this practice his own, will soon happily experience how quickly the atmosphere of the soul, when obscured by sin, is cleared up again, and how speedily the weakened will gains new strength, nay, how it will be more ready to do

good after the fall than before. This exercise is not only a good penance and an effective remedy, but also has extraordinary educational effects in that it directs our endeavors anew to the ideas of which we had momentarily lost sight and causes the will to regain its shattered control over the infirmities of nature. There are few exercises that can be more urgently recommended than this. Especially penitents who are trying to rid themselves of a definite fault, should make use of this method. If we have been negligent in performing our ordinary duties, careless and lazy in doing our work, let us at once make up our mind, for the love of God and as a punishment for the faults committed, to be doubly zealous, doubly attentive in future. If we have been disrespectful or disobedient to our parents or superiors, if we have grieved them by ill-temper or bad behavior, let us seize the first opportunity to obey them more joyfully. If we have been lukewarm in our daily prayers, if we have said them with wilful distractions, let us repair this fault by praying with greater attention and fervor the next day. If we have hurt our fellowmen by harsh words, by a want of kindness and charity, let us take the next available opportunity to assist them. If we perceive that we have sinned by excess in eating and drinking, let us do penance for this by some

act of self-denial. If we have given too much license to our eyes and ears, let us keep a stricter watch over them when there is an opportunity for self-denial. And so forth. It is in this way true charity avenges every sinful act by an act of the opposite virtue. Thus Christian prudence knows how to turn faults into benefits, thus Christian self-control converts every fault into an occasion for progress. In this manner is confirmed the word of Holy Scripture that "for them that love God all things work unto good" (Rom. VIII, 28). The early Christians were familiar with this penitential exercise. St. Pacian, Bishop of Barcelona, who died in 390, admonishes the faithful thus: "All other [except mortal] sins are atoned for by doing something better. Thus greed is expiated by generosity, abusive language is counterbalanced by rendering satisfaction, sadness is relieved by joy, rough treatment is amended by meekness, levity by seriousness, bad conduct by good behavior, and each fault is repaired by its opposite."

These are the chief means for blotting out venial sins outside of confession. Most of them have this advantage, that they may be employed at any time, and no difficulties are connected with their use. What can hinder us from making an act of contrition immediately after committing a sin? What difficulty is

there in saying a prayer to obtain forgiveness of our trespasses, or in vowing to perform an act of the opposite virtue? Have we not a thousand opportunities every day to revive our charity by a short meditation, by a visit to some church, by lifting heart and mind to heaven, by ejaculatory prayer—to revivify that love of God which, according to the teaching of St. Thomas, consumes venial sins as fire consumes straw? We cannot go to confession whenever we please, but we may cleanse ourselves from venial sin without confession at any time. Let us rejoice at this opportunity and make the best possible use of it.

Venial sin has but a brief existence in the soul of a true servant of God. Scarcely has it been committed, when it is already expiated. It follows that most of the venial sins of which men accuse themselves in confession, are already forgiven, at least as far as the guilt is concerned. Absolution, as a matter of fact, seldom touches sins whose guilt has not yet been remitted. This idea may seem too bold, but it agrees with the teaching of St. Thomas in his *Summa Theologica* (la zae, qu. 89, art. 2, ad 3). St. Paul says in his first Epistle to the Corinthians (III, 12) that there are Christians who build gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, and stubble upon the foundation of faith. Wood, hay, and stubble,

according to St. Thomas, signify venial sins. The objection: "If wood, hay, and stubble signify venial sins, we must say of the just that they heap up on the foundation of faith fuel for Purgatory, because all men commit venial sins," he answers as follows: "Those who are detached from the care of earthly things, do sometimes indeed commit sins, but these sins are but petty venial sins, and the sinners frequently purify themselves of them by 'the fervor of the love of God.' Hence it cannot say of them that they 'build venial sins on the foundation of faith, *because very little remains of these sins in the soul.* On the other hand, venial sins remain longer in the souls of those who are solicitous about wordly things, because they will not busy themselves with blotting them out by the fervor of charity."

Accordingly we are able, by loving God ardently, by harboring a penitential spirit, by cultivating repentance, to impart to nearly all acts of our daily life an expiatory power; we can, so to speak, turn our life into a sacrament of pardon and reconciliation. Let us do this with all our heart! Never let the stain of venial sin remain on your soul for any length of time! Do not delay in wiping out your daily faults until the day you go to confession. The great losses we suffer in grace and sanctification arise not so much from sin, as from the fact that we

tarry too long in expiating our failings and are satisfied too long to go ahead with lessened insight and weakened energy. Whoever has formed the habit of brushing away at once every speck of dust from his soul, and of removing immediately every obstacle that obstructs the operation of divine grace, will find that his sins do not remove him from God, but rather bring him nearer to God. And he will succeed in keeping his thoughts and sentiments pure and on a high spiritual level—which is a sign of divine predilection.

This doctrine of the remission of venial sins outside of the Sacrament of Penance is apt to broaden our view and to impart to it a liberty which is free from all anxiety. Let us always bear in mind these three practical truths: (1) If we have failed, we possess numerous means of repairing our faults at once; (2) if we have expiated a fault by personal penance, we are free to submit it to sacramental absolution; (3) if we resolve to submit a venial sin to the tribunal of Penance, we are conscious that we act not from necessity, but from free and unrestrained charity. Therefore we take for the leading idea of this little book that, in the confession of venial sins, everything should be done from zeal, and nothing from compulsion.

CHAPTER III

CONFESSION AS A MEANS OF BLOTTING OUT VENIAL SINS

THE Sacrament of Penance was instituted by our merciful Saviour to remit sins—first of all mortal sins, and secondarily venial sins. Hence venial sins constitute matter for absolution and may be confessed.

However, the custom of blotting out venial sins by confession did not exist in the Church at all times, especially not in the era of the martyrs. Whenever in the first four centuries the shepherds of souls touch on the healing of men's "daily shortcomings" in their instructions, they recommend prayer, almsgiving, a forgiving spirit, daily acts of mortification, the word of God, the Holy Eucharist—but never confession. In all of the early Christian literature there is not a single sentence which clearly states that the Christians of those days went to confession solely for the purpose of obtaining forgiveness for venial sins. If such a thing did happen, it was because those sins were of a nature that they could

hardly be distinguished from mortal sins. Thus St. Cyprian relates that, after the Decian persecution, besides those who had apostatized from the faith, a few pious Christians sought and found in confession a remedy for "small and insignificant wounds" which they had received in combat. But there was no universal "custom" or "usage" of confessing venial sins in those days.

Venial sins are only *optional* matter for confession; they *may*, but need not be confessed. We may, therefore, safely assert that a Christian who preserves his soul free from mortal sin is not bound to go to confession. There is no general law of the Church obliging him to do so. The tenth canon of the Fourth Lateran Council, which obliges every Christian to confess his sins at least once a year, refers only to mortal sins. Anyone not guilty of mortal sin need not confess even once a year. Some theologians are of the opinion that such a person should present himself at least once a year to the priest in the confessional; but the majority deny this. When confession is prescribed for gaining the jubilee indulgence, this is no more an obligation than is the gaining of the indulgence itself. Some dioceses impose on a couple intending to get married, the obligation to go to confession before the marriage ceremony. Where this is the case, confession is an obli-

gation, but one that binds only those who wish to marry.

If one would go farther and, in view of the fact that there are many other means for blotting out venial sins, assert that confession made solely for this purpose is useless and superfluous, he would commit a serious error. To prove this we need only point to the penitential discipline of the Church since the fifth century. The custom of making venial sins a matter for frequent confession arose at a time when divinely inspired men, with the approbation of the bishops, began to make the imitation of Christ their exclusive life-task, and to practice this art according to a fixed system, under the direction of a superior and in common with like-minded brethren. This came about in the fourth and fifth centuries. *Devotional confession*, as we may call it, originated in the monasteries. Thence it gradually spread among the people, receiving a strong impetus from the Third Orders and the penitential fraternities of the Middle Ages. The various stages of this development can be clearly traced. The general constitutions of the Franciscan Order, composed in the 13th century and revised in 1331, contained the rule that all the *fratres* must have a definite confessor, to whom they are bound to confess their sins

twice a week.[1] This rule applied to the members of the Order proper. In regard to the Brethren and Sisters of the Third Order, the statute approved by Pope Nicolas IV, in 1289, merely enacted that they should go to confession and reverently receive Holy Communion three times a year, namely, at Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. Still less was required of the members of the "Fraternity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Francis for Secular Persons" in Brixen, Tyrol, whose rule prescribed only two confessions per year. Then an era of rapid progress set in. In the latter part of the 14th century St. Catherine of Siena, herself a member of the Third Order of St. Dominic, made strenuous efforts to introduce frequent confession among her many friends in the world. We learn from a letter she wrote to Ristoro Canigiani that at first she only gave the advice "to confess once a month, more often if possible, but never less often." Most of her disciples went to confession every Saturday. After the Council of Trent the custom of frequent confession as a means of devotion and spiritual progress grew rapidly and was adopted by all fervent Christians, among the clergy as well as the laity, in monasteries as well as in the world. St. Philip Neri and St.

[1] *Archivum Francisc. Hist.*, Vol I, pp. 421 sqq.

Teresa practiced it and induced others to do so. Pope St. Pius V confessed his sins every day; St. Francis de Sales and St. Vincent de Paul constantly exhorted the laity to go to confession often.

Such a development within the Church must be regarded as a work of the Holy Ghost, the source and regulator of religious and moral life in the mystical body of Christ. Anyone, therefore, who would regard frequent confession for purely devotional purposes as useless or superfluous, would place himself in opposition to the Holy Ghost, who rules the Church. When the pseudo-synod of Pistoja expressed the wish that the faithful should not go to confession so frequently on account of their venial sins, Pope Pius VI declared this opinion temerarious, pernicious, and contrary to the practice of the saints and pious Christians as approved of by the Council of Trent. The Church has formally sanctioned the practice, and it is clear that she had weighty reasons for doing so.

Let us now ask ourselves the question: Why do we use the Sacrament of Penance for wiping out venial sins, although we have at our disposal so many other and more convenient means of expiating them? The answer is: Because the Sacrament of Penance contains special means for cleansing the soul from sins, for sanctifying and preserving it—

means which are not available in the same measure and efficacy outside the confessional.

A mere glance at the constituent parts of the Sacrament of Penance will show what we mean. This Sacrament consists, (1) of the most effective acts of personal penance, *i. e.*, self-accusation, contrition, purpose of amendment, satisfaction, and (2) of the most powerful means placed at our disposal for gaining salvation, namely, the supernatural power of a Sacrament of the New Law, operating infallibly and directly. This accumulation of the most powerful means of cleansing the soul corresponds to the efficacy of confession, which embraces the past and the future with the same degree of strength.

Regarding the past, the Sacrament of Penance exercises the following effects: it deletes sin, *i. e.*, remits the guilt of the venial sins confessed by the penitent. It does this by virtue of the power of the keys conferred on the Church by Christ. In this respect, confession has no advantage over other means of atonement when there is question of venial sins, because the guilt of sin, being indivisible, can only be remitted in its entirety, and in as well as outside of confession only those sins are forgiven from which the soul has cut herself loose.

The Sacrament of Penance, moreover, remits a

portion of the temporal punishment due to venial sin. This effect, too, Penance has in common with the other means of atonement, for the guilt is never forgiven without at the same time remitting part of the punishment. But there is this difference in favor of sacramental confession, that, given the same penitential spirit, more punishments are remitted in confession than outside of it.

Finally, the Sacrament of Penance heals the soul from the evil effects of sin. Venial sin causes an ailment which retards the practice of virtue, diverts the heart from Heaven to earth, nourishes concupiscence and strengthens temptations. Against this injury the Sacrament of Penance possesses a healing power all its own. In the famous "Decree for the Armenians" the Apostolic See teaches: "Whenever we have contracted a disease of the soul by sin, we are spiritually healed by the Sacrament of Penance." Experience gloriously confirms this truth. A good confession has an extraordinarily beneficial and soothing effect upon the soul. How relieved we are after going to confession, feeling as if a heavy load had been removed, as though we stepped from a dark and stuffy room out into the bright sunlight and fresh air, as though we had recovered from serious illness. There are other means, it is true, by which the poison left behind by sin may

be eliminated from the soul. How else could the early Christians have become saints? But I would like to say that none of these means works as promptly and perceptibly as the Sacrament of Penance. We have no doubt all tried some other way, but how long did it not take and how many efforts did we not have to make until by repeated acts of virtue our sin-laden and sin-stained soul regained its heavenward impulse!

Truly inestimable are the effects of the Sacrament of Penance in respect to the future. This Sacrament fairly challenges us to fight against sin. And when the hour of combat has come, it backs up and sustains the will by special graces, so that it may not tire in the struggle, and helps it to overcome temptations. Confession possesses an extraordinary moral and educational force which sooner or later carries the sincere penitent upward and keeps him on the heights of pure endeavor. There is no part of Penance that does not share in this force.

The examination of conscience, to begin with, compels man to enter into himself. He must tear himself loose from the turmoil and distraction of his daily work and become calm and quiet, so that, by entering into the presence of God, he may fully recover himself. He must then examine thoroughly all his acts and omissions and, by applying the yard-

stick of divine law and the scale of sanctity, discover wherein he has failed. However, he must not rest content with this, but examine his thoughts and innermost sentiments, and, if an interior voice urges him, he will examine also from what source his actions have come. It is precisely this part of the examination of conscience that produces other important results for further moral improvement. The soul often becomes conscious of things which she had overlooked before, perhaps purposely, in the hustle and bustle of everyday life—things which may have a disastrous influence on her salvation, such as ignoble motives which determined her action and about which she has deceived herself; sentiments and inclinations which she fancied to be of noble origin, but which really originated in the flesh and led to carnal sins; touches of selfishness, vanity, or stubbornness, which for some time have entered with ever increasing intensity into her doings and threatened to depreciate or spoil her best actions. Such unpleasant discoveries sometimes lead to interior conflicts. It is hard to admit imperfections and weaknesses. It humbles our pride. It severely touches our self-love, because the admission that disorder exists often imposes the sacrifice of one or the other pet association. The soul may resist for a while, but if she is sincere, she

must in the end see the truth and admit it. When she finally has admitted it, she has not only preserved herself from great harm, but also won that most glorious acquisition—self-knowledge. True knowledge of self is the foundation of all improvement. It alone inspires wise resolutions. It alone produces in truly Christian hearts the two fundamental virtues which lead to Heaven, namely, humility and sincere submission to God. Such is the educational force of the examination of conscience. There is, of course, also a superficial self-examination which brings but little moral gain, but herein precisely lies the advantage of the Sacrament of Penance that it compels the penitent to enter deeply into his own soul.

If the examination of conscience enables us to gain our moral bearings; the firm purpose of amendment summarizes it and turns it effectively into new paths. The moral value of a good resolution can be best seen if we consider the various parts of which it is composed. To make the purpose of amendment perfect in every respect, the soul must try to discover that point in her moral character which is most exposed to danger or stands most in need of reform. To resist evil, she must furthermore foresee, as it were, the various circumstances of time, place, persons, things in which the particu-

lar evil inclination in question usually leads to sin. She must take the necessary precautions to prevent the temptation, or weaken its force if it comes unbidden. She must furthermore get ready all the little aids which, insignificant as they may appear, in themselves often save men in the hour of temptation. And then she must summon all her willpower to do what is good and marshal all her forces against the enemy. In other words, to make a good purpose of amendment means to revive the work of self-training, which should never stop, giving it a new direction and new organization. Who does not see that such a purpose of amendment is a good moral act?

Do we need to say anything about the protective and educational power of auricular confession? The voluntary confession of one's sins to a fellowman carries with it a profound, but wholesome humiliation. Even the confession of venial sins may, under certain circumstances, be exceedingly humiliating. But this self-humiliation brings exaltation, this genuine humility liberates, this shame expiates our guilt and preserves us from future sin. The memory of confession on its part may help to make future temptations less attractive.

The effects of the penitent's personal acts of humiliation are enhanced by the words of admoni-

tion, encouragement, and instruction uttered by the confessor. He is a guide, a teacher, and a physician, who is able to do even more for the penitent confessing only venial sins, because he need not devote his attention to things which must occupy his mind when he deals with mortal transgressions, but can devote himself entirely to the guidance and betterment of the penitent. He will, therefore, enthusiastically direct attention to the goal set up for all Christians by Our Lord: "Be ye perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect." He will acquaint the penitent with the means at the disposal of those who strive for perfection. He will advise him as to how to overcome the difficulties peculiar to a devout life. He will admonish and arouse the penitent when he becomes careless and lukewarm. He will console and encourage him when the work of sanctification makes slower progress than the ardent soul desires. He will, by pointing out the dangers threatening all who strive for perfection, endeavor to preserve that which has been attained by humility and fear of God. Thus a confessor who possesses the requisite knowledge and piety and unites mature experience with genuine priestly solicitude, may exercise an extraordinarily beneficial influence on the spiritual development of his penitents.

All these forces, working for the prevention of

future sins and a progressive improvement in the spiritual condition of the soul, are raised to a supernatural plane by the sacramental effects of Penance. We mention first of all the "special graces" conferred by this Sacrament. Penance is a Sacrament of contrition, but it is also a Sacrament of amendment. And as it gives to contrition a mysterious power of forgiveness and restoration by virtue of the merits of Christ's sacred blood, so it adds to the purpose of amendment supernatural strength, enabling the penitent sinner to remain steadfast in grace. These so-called "special graces" of the Sacrament of Penance are supernatural helps, conferred upon the penitent in virtue of the Sacrament, to support the will against concupiscence and to restore its power when it grows weak. We all know from experience that the resolutions made in confession have a peculiar tenacity. Indeed it sometimes appears as if they had a life all their own, so vividly do they force themselves into our recollection when the hour of carrying them into effect has come, so urgently do they admonish us to remain steadfast when we waver, so severely do they accuse us when we have been unfaithful to them. All this is brought about by the sacramental sealing of the purpose of amendment by the "special graces" peculiar to the Sacrament of Penance.

The strongest supernatural reason for this liberating effect of the Sacrament of Penance, when used as a means of spiritual progress, is that it carries with it an increase of sanctifying grace and a renewed fervor of charity. Now every increase of charity in the soul must be highly valued, for ardent charity enables the soul to be zealous in doing good, to take joy in labor and suffering, to long more ardently for God and Heaven. It is charity or love of God which lifts and carries the soul upward and makes it easy for her to strive for her goal. Charity makes the soul shudder with horror when the spectre of temptation rises before it. Charity incessantly urges us to perform good works, delights in whatever pertains to God, and finds no rest except in Him. Charity makes man ready to sacrifice himself for God. It is the strongest motive power in the human heart and its most reliable guide.

Let us not forget that particular effect of the Sacrament of Penance, especially when used as a means of perfection, which the Council of Trent expresses thus: Reconciliation with God is sometimes accompanied, in those who reverently receive this Sacrament, by peace and ease of conscience, coupled with strong consolation of the spirit.[1]

[1] Sess. XIV, 3.

The advantages of sacramental confession over all extra-sacramental means of wiping out venial sin may be summed up as follows: In sacramental confession the repentance of the sinner is more deliberate, more conscientious, more painstaking, and the atoning effect of the Sacrament more supernatural, more profound, and more lasting than outside of confession. The Sacrament of Penance is, therefore, not only the best means of expiating past sins, but also the strongest weapon against future transgressions. In truth, confession may be called the best means of training the soul for Christ.

Therefore, whoever desires to retain a firm hold on the development of his interior life, whoever seeks inspiration and lasting help in his warfare against his faults and foibles and on the way of Christian perfection, should frequently and reverently go to confession.

In order not to be misunderstood, I must remark that, in emphasizing the need of self-training it is not my intention to favor those individualistic tendencies which, in educating the young, have only one object in view, namely, to make man sufficient unto himself. There are not a few educators, even among Catholics, who one-sidedly overemphasize character, personality, independence, self-determination, forgetting that we are not merely human

beings, but also Christians, Catholics, members of the Church, who must be ready always to subordinate their religious life to the guidance of the Church. When I say a man should train himself, I do not wish to exclude the co-operation of others. We need to be guided and directed by others all through life, as the lives of the saints amply prove. Of course, the degree of dependency is less in the adult than in the child. I mean that we should perfect ourselves by personal effort, without excluding external leadership. This work of self-perfection each one must do of his own initiative, all by himself. When we were children, our parents urged us to lay aside our faults. Now that we have outgrown the rod, who will egg us on if we do not do it ourselves? When we were young, our parents accustomed us to discipline and good manners, and for this purpose impressed on our young mind the beautiful words: *Christian self-denial.* Who will now exhort us to be good and exercise us in Christian self-denial, if we do not do it ourselves? The Church and her ministers indeed still preach these virtues; but since no compulsion is used, everything depends on ourselves. Undoubtedly all educational efforts must be based on self-training, and education is of value only in so far as it induces and enables us to train ourselves.

Let us now draw a few practical conclusions from what has been said.

(1) As Confession is but one of many means of getting rid of venial sin, let the children of God be free in its use. Neither before nor after confession allow yourself to be disturbed by anxiety, as if you stood in need of confession, or as if you were bound to confess this or that sin. As long as your own good judgment and that of your confessor assure you that what troubles you is only a venial sin, preserve your freedom and do not let any imaginary compulsion obstruct the road to Christ.

(2) Since the Sacrament of Penance is attended by a certain amount of formality and hence not always available, do not neglect the use of the other means of cancelling venial sins. Above all, frequently make acts of perfect love and perfect contrition. Adopt the excellent custom of repairing every fault committed against the good resolutions made in confession, in fact every serious fault, by eliciting an act of the opposite virtue.

(3) As confession far surpasses all other means of expiation in power and fruitfulness, adopt the pious custom of receiving the Sacrament of Penance frequently with a clear understanding and a lively zeal, not with nervous anxiety, not carelessly, but

with a candid and joyful heart. The habit of frequent confession will keep your soul pure and guide you rapidly to the heights of Christian perfection.

CHAPTER IV

WHAT INTENTION WE SHOULD HAVE IN GOING TO CONFESSION

NOTHING is so apt to impart firmness of will, consistency, and perseverance as a clear understanding of one's aims—a clear and definite purpose. The man who knows what he wants possesses great sureness in the selection and use of his means, and a peculiar knack of picking from his materials that which best serves his purpose.

Confession is a means to an end. We do not go to confession merely for the sake of confessing. But have we all a clear knowledge of the value of confession as means to an end? Are the supernatural ends to which it is directed by Our Lord and Saviour always perfectly understood? Are they always carefully borne in mind, in practice? What intentions guide the faithful when they go to Confession, especially when they go frequently as a means of spiritual progress? Are these intentions in every way in accordance with the two great

purposes for which the Sacrament of Penance was instituted, namely, purity of heart and the diminution of our faults?

To answer these questions correctly, we must above all clearly distinguish between *external occasions* and *internal motives*.

There are many external occasions for confession. Two friends meet on the eve of a great feast; one of them says to the other: "I'm going to confession; go with me. You need it as much as I do." This is for the other an occasion to go to confession. Sometimes we hear one say to another: "There is a strange priest here to hear confessions; he is always so kind in the confessional; come, let us make use of the opportunity." The most frequent occasions are the return of the days on which the faithful are in the habit of going to confession from custom, or on the advice of their confessor, or by a rule of their Order. There are some who do not approve of such regular confessions, holding that if confession is set for a certain day, at regular intervals, it will become a matter of mere routine and the reception of the Sacrament will sink to the level of a perfunctory act. Frequently the necessary interior disposition will be wanting when the day for confession arrives. We should not go to confession, they say, until we feel an "interior urge,"

for only then is the required interior disposition present, and so forth.

This view is opposed to the rule of life laid down by St. Francis de Sales: "Set aside certain days for confession and Communion." The objections mentioned may be answered as follows: It is quite true that the external occasion, especially when frequent and regularly recurring, does not *per se* produce the state of mind that is necessary for the worthy reception of the Sacrament of Penance. It may happen that Saturday comes again and we do not feel the least inclination to go to confession. Should we stay away from confession on this account?

Experience teaches that if one omits the customary weekly confession, because one is disinclined, one finds oneself much weaker, more unsteady and careless the following week. Conversely, it is a very common occurrence that persons who overcome their repugnance and confess with a good will, even without sentimental fervor, afterwards feel a surprising interior strength and consolation. We should, therefore, not omit our regular confession because we do not feel inclined, but make a strong effort to overcome this disinclination, which is nothing less than spiritual sloth. This is not as difficult as it may seem. All we need to do is to ponder the following truths:

What impels us to go to confession on this particular day is either a habit approved by all good Christians, or the advice of our confessor, or a precept of our holy rule. Through all these things God manifests His will to us. Will it not be wiser to heed His invitation than the voice of sloth? Can we doubt that at this moment the graces necessary for a good confession will be given to us? If God invites us to do a good work, He will give us the assistance necessary for it. Let us, therefore, follow the divine call. It will be better for us to go to confession without sensible enthusiasm than to wait for certain sentimental feelings, the supernatural value of which is not great. And in case these sentiments keep us waiting for a long time—as a rule they do keep us waiting longer in proportion as we grow more tepid and sinful—what then? Will not the final result be that we give up frequent confession altogether?

But what if going to confession becomes a matter of mere routine? Well, do not let the word routine frighten you! It is not as bad as it is described in some ascetical books. What does routine mean? In its most favorable sense the word means thoughtless action. If it is a question of "thought," therefore—and that is certainly the case when going to confession—we must, of course, guard against routine.

However, it is possible to confess thoughtlessly and superficially even if we go to confession only once a year. There is also a good routine. Routine in this sense means, "doing something by repetition, by habit, by acquired aptitude." Routine in this sense is highly estimated in trade or business, in fact in all human activities. Why should it not also be of value in the supernatural life of the soul? Do those who pray, confess their sins and receive holy Communion but rarely, do these things better than those who perform them frequently? True, the oftener an act is repeated, the less does the imagination take part in it. One who goes to Communion rarely may apparently be more deeply affected by it when he does go than one who receives this Sacrament frequently. However, this is only a matter of sentiment and imagination. In the moral and religious life these faculties of the soul play a minor rôle. Reason and the will, the two noblest faculties of man, cooperate faithfully as soon as he undertakes to perform a good deed; and when God invites us to a good deed, He will not fail to give us faith and grace.

When, therefore, the day for confession has come and sloth and disinclination would keep you back, summon all your powers and go. Invoke the

Holy Ghost with so much greater fervor, say an extra Hail Mary, and then calmly follow the divine guidance. He who has invited you to go to confession, will surely give you the grace to make a good one.

Of course, we must guard against a merely external and perfunctory confession.

With the genuine intentions that lead to confession we must not confound the thoughts which not seldom come to us uninvited before or during the act. Some persons need only to get ready for confession when the idle thought passes through their mind: "People will surely think you are pious because you go to confession and Communion so often." Others are attacked by the delusive idea that they have no other intention than to make a good impression on their confessor. Others have still more peculiar notions. Like a swarm of locusts such foolish thoughts come to certain souls in every good work which they intend to perform in public or in private. What is to be done?

Learn to distinguish clearly between thoughts and sentiments which accompany an action, and thoughts and sentiments which give the first impulse to perform that action. These latter are called motives. They alone give birth to the act, they alone

determine the intention from which it flows. Whatever else comes to us, whatever else creeps into our actions, does not affect our good work, if it happens against our will. In dealing with such involuntary thoughts we must be calm and firm. The best way is to put them out of the mind, to forget about them. If they return, be not confused, but ward them off again, and if they refuse to depart, bear them with patience. By no means let them keep you from doing good. The devil would gloat if he succeeded in estranging your soul from its Saviour. Do not give him this satisfaction. Whenever, therefore, you are determined to go to confession, let no disturbing thought prevent you from carrying out your resolution. Calmly banish all idle fancies, and if they disquiet your soul, say to them: "I neither do this nor will I omit to do it for your sake. I do it to please God and to save my soul and for no other reason."

We may also do like St. Gertrude, who, when others noticed the extraordinary graces given to her by God, rejoiced with all her heart and said: "If others take occasion from this to praise God's exceeding kindness, it is very good. And if they are incited thereby to greater zeal in His service, why should I not rejoice at this? But if anyone should take it into his head to praise me, he would merely

show that he does not know me." St. Gertrude considered herself "a mere scarecrow in God's garden." [1]

Among the intentions with which a person may go to confession, there are some that are bad, some that are not bad but very human, and some that are good.

That we must not go to confession with a bad intention, *e. g.*, with self-seeking, low, calculating motives, goes without saying. To make the holy Sacrament in which the blood of Our Redeemer washes away our sins, serve worldly purposes, would be very sinful. One who went to confession with a grievously sinful intention would commit a sacrilege.

Not sinful, but neither praiseworthy, are certain all too human intentions which are sometimes met with in penitents. Not always praiseworthy is, *e. g.*, the intention of those who go to confession "to calm themselves." How many are there who run to the confessional merely because they are driven to it by unrest! They do not find the rest they seek, for the simple reason that they are seeking their own self, not God. There are, of course, circumstances in which a person has reasons to be disquieted about the condition of his soul. One may, for instance,

[1] *Ambassador of Divine Love*, I, 11.

have shown a precarious weakness in times of temptation. Or one may be guilty of an action which exceeds the ordinary measure of malice contained in a venial sin, without being sure that one has committed a mortal sin. Or one may have for a while so grossly neglected certain duties that serious consequences resulted, which, of course, one realized only subsequently. In such cases one has reason to be alarmed. The characteristic sign by which this wholesome fear may be recognized is that a definite wrong has been committed. Whoever goes to confession under such circumstances to regain his peace of mind, performs a good act. But there is an unrest of a very different kind, whose chief characteristic is its inexplicability. It comes upon a person like a sickness, he does not know whence or why. It is not based on any definite action. The soul is not able to designate the wrong deed which causes this unrest, or else it is a reason which the confessor has repeatedly declared to be vain and futile. Such persons may, of course, go to confession often, and they may and should explain to the confessor what worries them; he will help them as best he can, if they will carefully follow his directions. They will be able to do this so much more easily if they try to forget themselves and bear in mind God's goodness and mercy. All this unrest does not matter—we may

say to ourselves—for I have done all that God demands of me, all that the Church prescribes, all that my confessor has declared sufficient. If such penitents are not obedient, but stubbornly cling to their own notions instead of placing their trust in God, then unrest will gain the upper hand over the sober deliberations of reason and faith, and they will fall a prey to the unfortunate mania of incessantly seeking relief by frequent confession. But they will pile confession upon confession in vain. The coveted rest flees from them, because the Sacrament of Penance is a remedy for sick souls, but not a palliative for nervous, selfish, and self-tormenting minds. For such interior disquietude, prayer, patience, self-control, resignation to the will of God, and sometimes consultation with a physician would be more expedient than running from one confessor to another, or incessantly pestering the same confessor.

Let us now discuss the intentions with which we should go to confession.

Most of those who go to confession frequently are led by the desire to cleanse their soul thoroughly from the everyday sins which all pilgrims in this valley of tears are so liable to commit. They have offended, perhaps frequently offended, though it be only in small things, and although they have not

failed to make use of the extra-sacramental means of expiation, they are pained by the thought that their soul is unclean and has lost its brightness and beauty. Therefore they go to confession for a thorough cleansing. Others go in order to prepare themselves better for Holy Communion, or to celebrate a high feast in a more dignified manner, or to gain an indulgence. At the bottom of all these intentions lies the idea of restoring the former purity of the soul and removing the evil consequences of sin. The eyes of these penitents are turned towards the past.

There is no question that such intentions are good, for they conform to the first and chief purpose for which Christ instituted the Sacrament of Penance, namely, to effect the remission of sins. There is, however, a certain one-sidedness in having only the past in mind and paying little or no attention to the future. It is not the sole purpose of confession to get rid of the sins one has committed; there are sources of evil to be stopped up; the perverse inclinations which were the cause of our sins, have to be kept under strict discipline in order that we do not sin again. Penance has the double task of forgiving sins and preserving the penitent from future transgressions. A one-sided intention is the cause of many mistakes made in confession. The

examination of conscience will turn out altogether differently if we ask ourselves not only, what have I done, but also, what must I do in order not to sin any more or at least less frequently? That we think so little of the future when we go to confession is evidently one of the reasons why we gather so little fruit of amendment from the Sacrament of Penance.

There are too few penitents who, with a perfect intention, combine all that which the Sacrament of Penance is designed to produce in the soul;—penitents to whom confession is not only an institution of grace for the remission of sins, but also a school of training for Christ.

A confession which is to produce all its fruits, therefore, requires a twofold intention, namely (1) to obtain forgiveness and (2) to preserve and amend the soul. The former intention is dogmatically the more essential one, but the latter loses none of its importance on this account. There can be no doubt that the former suffices for the valid reception of the Sacrament, because it embraces the latter. Nevertheless, it remains true that the Sacrament of Penance is received with complete understanding and full effect only if great care is bestowed on both intentions.

An intention that is perfect in every way exerts

a profound influence on all parts of confession. It alone gives us a right understanding of things and enables us to assign to each its proper value. With such an intention in mind, we do not waste our time in an endless examination of conscience; it does away with random accusations; there is no useless self-torturing in trying to *feel* sorrow, no anxiety about the confession just finished, no over-hasty forgetting of the good resolutions, no feeble falling back into the sins confessed, no inert continuation in the same shortcomings and imperfections.

A perfect intention in confessing one's sins, of course, presupposes something important and great, namely, a determined striving after purity of heart and moral perfection. He who wishes to make a perfect confession, must energetically take in hand his own training for Christ. In this purpose, alas, many fail. They have no coarse vices, they commit no mortal sins; nor are they subject to strong temptations, which would oblige them to be more alert and stricter with themselves. And so they are satisfied and do not strive for higher perfection. They are unconcerned about their venial sins, which they confess over and over. They are not at all worried about the underlying evil inclinations, but allow them to continue their rank growth. Their hearts are not clean enough and their minds not

sufficiently enlightened to feel a genuine and deep horror of venial sin. They stop at the point which they have reached and do not care to go beyond that which they have attained. At the same time they go frequently to confession and Communion. Whether they can elicit the good resolutions which are necessary for the valid reception of the Sacrament of Penance, does not bother them over much. They say each time: "I will amend my life," but they hardly realize what this means. And yet "devotional confession" categorically demands a certain will to progress in the way of perfection, at least in the sense that we make a serious effort to combat the sins we have confessed. "He who does penance for venial sins," says St. Thomas, "must make at least some effort to reduce the number of his faults, else he will be in danger of backsliding, because he ceases to make progress."

Therefore, whenever we go to confession, let us do so with the sincere wish not only to cleanse our soul from guilt, not only to rid our heart of the poison left behind by sin, but also to find strength and assistance in the warfare against evil and to lessen our relapses. The source of our sins were the evil inclinations of the heart: sloth and love of luxury, vanity and pride, stubbornness and caprice, touchiness and a desire for retaliation, con-

cupiscence and sensuality. From the same source the same evils will flow in future. When we go to confession, therefore, let us think not only of our sins, but likewise of their causes. Let us meditate how to go about it to make the best use of the graces received in the Sacrament of Penance, in order that sin may not again wound our soul so easily and we may gradually destroy the evil that is in us.

CHAPTER V

THE SUBJECT-MATTER OF FREQUENT CONFESSION

IN confession used as a means of spiritual progress venial sins are the object of absolution and form the subject-matter for accusation. All the other matters often brought up in confession, such as temptations, difficulties met with in the spiritual life, imperfections, are, strictly speaking, not a part of the sacramental accusation.

How many of the venial sins committed must we confess, and which may we conceal without rendering the Sacrament invalid and exposing it to profanation? This is the first question to be treated in the present chapter. The following four principles may serve as an answer.

First principle: If none but venial sins have been committed, confession need not be complete. We need not accuse ourselves either of all venial sins we have committed since our last confession, or of all venial sins discovered in the examination of conscience, or of those which come to our mind during confession. It is left to our choice to confess

as many of our venial sins as we like and to conceal and keep to ourselves as many as we please. This is the express teaching of the Church. "Venial sins may be concealed in confession without guilt," says the Council of Trent.

From this first principle it follows that those act foolishly who torment themselves for hours in examining their conscience in order to confess all their faults with the greatest possible completeness. Why this anxiety, why this painful searching? It is altogether superfluous. Neither God nor the Church demands that which these penitents attempt to do. Is it not a futile undertaking to try to ascertain all one's venial sins? How often do we not offend God every day? In how many things may not a lukewarm soul displease Him? And who is able to draw the exact line where mere weakness ends and sin begins? The saints shed bitter tears over occurrences in which we, with the best of will, cannot discover anything wrong. If such things are sins in the eyes of God—and who would dare to assert that the saints were mistaken in regarding them as such?—how great will be the number of our daily transgressions, especially on days when we freely indulge our inclinations? Examine closely one day's doings. Where is there an action which is not vitiated from the outset by a wrong intention or by careless-

ness in performing it. Often an act which turned out passably good was afterwards spoiled by self-complacency. True, this defect is due rather to infirmity than to deliberate malice in those who are otherwise careful and conscientious. But may it be attributed to involuntary weakness in those who are indifferent and slothful? I scarcely think so. One thing is certain: such a day's doings would have filled the saints with profound consternation and boundless sorrow. Let us, therefore, when making our examination of conscience, give up the useless, self-tormenting search for the last grain of dust on the soul. Only when God Himself some day will send a ray of heavenly light into the darkness of our conscience, and when all our actions and omissions will be made manifest in the brightness of this light, only then shall we know the extent of our sinfulness. Thanks be to God! we are not obliged to know all our sins in order to expiate them! If that were the case, it might happen that, at the end of our earthly career, we should be face to face with a debt the enormity of which would make us despair. Whoever in some way leads a penitential and zealous life, unconsciously expiates much of that of which he is unconsciously guilty. The zealous Christian continually expiates and does penance for his sins. This is the reason why we are free to confess as

many or as few of our venial sins as we please, for the minimum of that which we must confess if we wish to receive the Sacrament, is very small indeed, as the following principle will show.

Second principle: In order to be validly absolved, it is enough, if one has committed no mortal sins, to accuse oneself of a single venial sin, either one of the more grievous or of the less grievous committed since our last confession, or many years ago, whether it has been previously confessed or not. The sole condition is that we are truly sorry for the sin of which we accuse ourselves.

It is not enough, however, to accuse ourselves of a mere imperfection, such as weakness of character, involuntary movements of concupiscence, or faults committed inadvertently. Moreover, no valid absolution can be given for the mere omission of a good work which was not of precept, or for the want of a higher perfection which is only recommended. If, for instance, a penitent would accuse himself somewhat like this: "I have involuntarily told a lie; I did not say the rosary; I always see the faults of others; I did not love God as I ought," this would *not* be valid matter for confession.

Third principle: If one would accuse oneself of unrepented faults only, his confession would be in-

valid. If this were done consciously or from gross neglect, it would, moreover, be a sacrilege.

Fourth principle: It militates against the respect due to the Sacrament of Penance to accuse oneself indiscriminately of repented and unrepented venial sins. St. Francis de Sales says in his famous *Introduction to a Devout Life* (II, 19): "When you accuse yourself of having told a lie, of having uttered an improper word, of having spent too much time in games, repent of this also, and make a firm resolution to do better, for it is an abuse to accuse oneself of any sin without having the intention of freeing oneself of it, because it is for this purpose that the Sacrament of Penance was instituted." The reason why St. Francis de Sales censures this abuse is that whoso indiscriminately confesses repented and unrepented sins and asks for absolution of them all, is responsible if the confessor pronounces absolution over unrepented sins.

Some moralists, it is true, excuse penitents who, for "higher reasons," *e. g.*, to humiliate themselves or to reveal the state of their soul more perfectly to their confessor, accuse themselves promiscuously of repented and unrepented sins in the manner described above. No case of this kind has ever occurred to me in practice, nor do we meet with any in

the lives of the saints. St. Francis de Sales, when speaking of the abuse of confessing unrepented sins, makes no distinction between higher and lower motives. Finally, it is hard to understand how these "higher motives" could lead a person to confess unrepented sins as if they were repented. If a penitent desires to humble himself before his confessor, he may mention those faults which he is not yet willing to give up, *after* the sacramental accusation proper, and do this with the remark that he has not as yet advanced far enough in virtue to tear his heart away from these faults. That would certainly disclose greater humility than to create the impression that he was sorry for them. The custom of confessing repented and unrepented sins indiscriminately is in most cases due not to "higher motives," but to thoughtlessness, superficiality, and indifference. This habit is quite common, and too much cannot be said to warn the faithful against it. It accustoms men to confess sins which they do not care to give up, to make an act of contrition without knowing for what, to make resolutions which one does not seriously think of carrying out. Such a manner of confessing one's sins cannot possibly train the soul in the spiritual life.

The four principles just enumerated indicate the range within which we may move about with free-

dom. It is spacious enough. We may confess what we like and as much as we like, provided we are sorry for the sins we confess. Does this mean that the contents and extent of our accusation may be left entirely to chance or an arbitrary will? By no means. For this would open the road to that superficial and improper manner of confessing which never leaves a deep and lasting impression on the soul. To confess properly and effectually we must, when selecting what to confess, be guided by two considerations, based on the nature of Penance, namely, to cleanse ourselves from sins or to train ourselves unto Christ. According as the one or the other consideration prevails, we shall confess differently.

The desire to repent, to expiate, to restore the soul to purity and beauty, etc., suggests a detailed accusation, above all of the more serious sins by which we have offended God and injured the soul. The desire to amend one's life, on the other hand, will cause one to weigh carefully what is expedient to confess, because this depends upon the attending difficulties and on the available strength. If the penitent has a great love of God and a strong will, he will want to confess many faults and a more extensive purpose of amendment. If, on the other hand, he has little strength and only a feeble desire

to advance towards spiritual perfection, he will confess only a few faults, in order that he may summon enough strength to fight against sin at least in the one or the other point.

Thus we have two methods of confessing one's sins, which are practiced in various degrees by the faithful. The first is that of a detailed accusation. There are penitents who each time review the entire field of their duties, examine their conduct carefully, and confess every, even the least, failing. In listening to them the confessor often hears things in which only an eye enlightened by God can detect anything wrong. Certain angelic souls who thus accuse themselves, confess so humbly and simply that the confessor is very much edified, and at times, when reflecting upon his own imperfections, feels ashamed. A quite different type of penitents are those who confess verbosely and superficially, and still another are the scrupulous with their nervous and interminable self-accusations.

The other method may be called that of restricted accusation. There are some penitents (not many) who regularly accuse themselves of but one venial sin. Naturally it is one on which they have concentrated all their efforts, to which they oppose their monthly resolution, and which they have made the object of their particular examen. Others accuse

themselves of several faults, but never more than three or four. This method is essentially educational and possesses a special advantage, namely, in that it furnishes an excellent basis for improvement, the work of the future. It benefits first of all the purpose of amendment: the smaller the number of sins of which I accuse myself, the more definite and concrete will be my purpose of amendment, the more easily can I watch over its execution and ascertain whether or not my confession has produced fruit. Penitents who confess in this manner are, as a rule, still deeply mired in all kinds of faults, but labor hard and persistently to improve their spiritual condition.

Some penitents combine both methods in order to gain the advantages of both; they accuse themselves of many sins, but select one or the other as the object of a *special* purpose of amendment. (See Chapter VIII, *infra.*)

Each penitent should adopt the method best suited to his state of mind. Restricted confession should be recommended to those who are afflicted with a serious and stubborn sinful habit, *e. g.*, anger, pronounced pride, unkindliness in speech, etc. Against such faults the penitent must summon all the forces of his soul. The entire supernatural power of the Sacrament of Penance must be used to

overcome them. One who is afflicted by such a habit, therefore, should make it the chief subject of his self-accusation in the confessional. If he desires to add a second or third point, he may choose such faults as are connected with his main failing. For instance, if I am aware that vanity is one of the causes of my unkindness in speech, I had better mention it in confession. If I know that anger has less power over me after devoutly saying my morning prayers, I had better include in my accusation faults committed during prayer. There is no doubt that restricted confession produces the best results in combatting predominant faults.

The same method may be recommended to those who do not feel themselves drawn to a more devout life. Some persons remain a long time in this condition. They are not precisely lukewarm, they commit no serious faults, yet they feel listless and dull and have no desire to strive after higher ideals. They are fully conscious of the defects of their conduct, but lack of spiritual energy paralyzes them and prevents any generous resolve. When the day appointed for confession arrives, they do not know where to begin with their examination of conscience, or how to elicit contrition, or what sort of resolution to make. Therefore, they find it difficult to go to confession and easily allow themselves to be de-

terred. To such we give the following advice: If they do not know what to confess, they should select any deficiency in their religious life and make it the subject-matter of confession. Let us take, for example, morning and evening prayers. Have you recited them regularly every day? Have you always said them in the right way? You experienced many distractions, but none were intentional. Perhaps these distractions were due to the fact that you made no effort to collect your thoughts for prayer, to place yourself in the presence of God, to define your intentions. Here, probably, is the rub; you have not prepared yourself properly for prayer; you have "acted as one who tempts God." Well, then, make this negligence a part of your accusation and purpose of amendment for the coming week. Thus the soul will be roused to new activity and you will perceive that the grace of God is ever present to enable you to do good.

The method of restricted confession must be recommended also to the lukewarm. While it is all right for them to ascertain for once, by a thorough examination of conscience, the wretched and desolate state of their spiritual life, after this has been done and no zealous striving aroused, it is better to select only a few faults for regular confession. Whence could they summon the energy necessary

for extensive resolutions? A restricted confession and a concise, but very definite resolve, will furnish them an opportunity as well as an incentive to make a new effort; and even if they make no effort, they are at least no longer deceived in regard to their sad condition, and this may be of great help to them.

Restricted confession is to be recommended also to those who find it difficult to elicit contrition, and especially those who, after confessing, are troubled by doubts and misgivings regarding the genuineness of their contrition. If the confession is limited to a very small terrain, nothing will be easier than to prove that true contrition is present. For, either we make some effort after confession to carry out our purpose of amendment—which on account of its definite character can easily be known—and in that case we have had true contrition; or we do nothing at all to carry out our resolution, and in that case it is doubtful whether our contrition was genuine. If our purpose of amendment was definite and practical, we shall almost of necessity make some effort to keep it.

If the confessor exhorts scrupulous persons to confine their accusation to one or a few points, they should keep within the prescribed bounds as a matter of obedience.

Whoever has the habit of confessing only a few

sins, must not forget to examine his conscience from time to time as to other transgressions, else new and more serious faults may creep in unawares.

The method of confessing one's faults in detail cannot be recommended to those who are tepid or nervous, because the latter are easily confused by it and the former like to use an extensive resolution as a welcome excuse for being inactive. But, whenever the Holy Ghost excites a lively desire of spiritual purity in the soul and whenever this desire is accompanied by a strong act of the will to institute a thorough cleansing and inaugurate continuous striving after holiness, a detailed confession is indicated. The touchstone by which we may know whether the Spirit of God is the moving force in such a detailed confession, consists of calmness, humility, and obedience. When these marks are present, the desire for a detailed confession comes neither from nervous fear nor from vanity, but from that deep sense of sinfulness which we perceive in the saints as the result of progressive enlightment.

Whichever we may choose, whether detailed or restricted confession, let us not in our accusation pour forth indiscriminately whatever entered our mind during the examination of conscience. Let us not confess any fault for which we are not truly sorry; above all let us not confess what we do not

seriously intend to amend. Children often confess thus without reflection. But in adults a disorderly, unmethodical confession is reprehensible because it necessarily leads to defective contrition and especially to confused resolutions that cannot be kept. This method is employed by those who always remain on the same spot, or grow worse with increasing age, who lack self-discipline and a resolute will, and who do not commit grievous sins solely for the reason that, having a good disposition, they are not subject to severe struggles and temptations.

Sins alone are matter for absolution and self-accusation in the Sacrament of Penance. Hence, strictly speaking, sins alone are material for confession. But as a matter of fact other things are also brought up for discussion, especially by those who confess frequently without having committed mortal sins. Thus one penitent will reveal the temptations and struggles which have attacked his soul; another will complain of spiritual dryness, confusion, and lack of courage. Some ask whether this or that is allowed. Young people often ask for advice regarding the choice of a state of life. A mother pours forth her heart to the priest regarding her wayward boy. Hard-pressed innocence begs for help, and so forth. Thus confession, especially when employed as a means of spiritual progress, becomes as it were

a new Bethsaida, where the victims of trouble and misery gather, seeking consolation, help, and relief. Oh, how many tears are shed in the confessional—tears of which no one knows, which are concealed even from relatives and friends!

Do these things belong in the confessional or not? True, some penitents abuse the liberty of speech granted in confession to their own detriment, to the annoyance of the priest, and to the vexation of those awaiting their turn. Some imagine they must relate to the confessor whatever they have seen, heard or suffered. Others like to complain about themselves, and still more about the "wicked world." Others after confession torment the confessor with insignificant questions which they could answer for themselves if they would take the trouble to do a little thinking. Against such abuses the confessor should proceed sternly by cutting short all unnecessary explanations. Confession is a Sacrament instituted by Christ for the remission of sins. The confessional is a sacred tribunal. Neither should be dishonored by idle gossip, by sentimental effusions or misplaced lamentations, purposeless whining and useless and improper questions.

But abuse must not preclude the proper use of a thing. The priest in the confessional is a father, a guide, a teacher, a physician, and a consoler. All

who are in distress or mental confusion, ignorance, doubt or danger, have a claim on him. Whenever, therefore, a heart is burdened with a heavy cross; whenever a mind, otherwise clear, stern, and austere, finds itself enveloped in a mist of doubts and faintheartedness; whenever a soul, ordinarily enjoying peace, is beset by storms of temptation so fierce that even the experienced priest begins to fear and tremble; whenever a distressed penitent, who has prayed and struggled in deep sorrow over his relapses, desires to pour forth his soul in grief over his weakness and misery: no one has a right to forbid tears! Christian piety has inscribed above the tabernacle the legend: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are burdened, I will give you rest." (Matt. XI, 28.) These words could be no less appropriately placed over the confessional.

This is also the place to deal with confession as a means for the direction of souls. Absolution and spiritual guidance are two separate and distinct things which do not necessarily go hand in hand. There are many penitents who have a confessor, but no spiritual director in the strict sense of the word. Many expect nothing from the confessor but absolution; even the admonition is to them a matter of indifference. Others have a spiritual director, but he is not the priest to whom they ordinarily confess.

We meet with such cases frequently in the writings of St. Francis de Sales. He was the spiritual director of many souls who never went to confession to him. The ordinary and most usual thing is, of course, that confessor and spiritual director are one and the same person.

Not all Christians are in need of a spiritual director, but there are some who can hardly get along without one. The following persons need the guidance of an experienced director: neo-converts, who need to be confirmed in faith and the practice of virtue; those who are harassed by temptations; those who have a confused and timid conscience; and, finally, those whom God leads to their goal in an extraordinary manner. Many modern saints have placed themselves under special spiritual guidance. Mark well, however, that they did not become saints for the reason that they had a spiritual director, but, on the contrary, they stood in need of special guidance by an experienced priest because God led them by extraordinary ways. The vast majority of Christians are content with that general guidance which the Church accords to all in sermons, divine service, and the Sacraments. It is surprising how clearly these Christians judge the state of their soul, past and present, and how surely they walk on the road to perfection. They are a glorious testimony to the

simplicity, clearness, and consistency of the moral law and demonstrate the fecundity of the Church's general teaching. Above all, however, they are a living proof of the operation of the Holy Ghost in the hearts of pious and simple Christians. Some pride themselves on the fact that, like St. Teresa, they have a special spiritual director. This is no reason for boasting. Childlike innocence needs no spiritual director, whereas vice just converted cannot do without one. The frantic efforts of some penitents, especially women, to press any easily accessible confessor into service as spiritual director often excite ridicule. They become positively vexatious if they try to get young and inexperienced priests to serve as directors.

Spiritual direction presupposes a manifestation of the soul. Therefore, one who goes to confession not only for the sake of obtaining absolution, but likewise for spiritual guidance, should reveal his innermost thoughts to the priest. He should not only confess his faults, especially his predominant faults, but also reveal his good and bad habits, the difficulties which he encounters on the road to perfection, the exalted or depressed state in which his soul may be. Finally, he should also manifest to the confessor the inspirations of the Holy Ghost and the interior incitements to good deeds with which he may be

favored. The spiritual director must be enabled to look into the deepest abysses of the soul, else it will be impossible for him to have the necessary security in his judgment at all times.

This self-manifestation is made *after* the regular sacramental confession and is clearly distinct from it. When I say that one should manifest his whole soul to one's spiritual director, I must not omit to add that the main thing is not so much to reveal details, as characteristic traits. With all due regard to completeness, there must be restriction as to essentials and brevity of expression. Not every confession needs to be a summary of one's interior life; once a month suffices or even more rarely if one goes to confession every week. It would not be right to bother the confessor with a detailed manifestation of conscience at a time when many other penitents surround the confessional awaiting their turn.

Is it advisable to mention in devotional confession some sin of one's past life, in order to assure the validity of the Sacrament? The validity of such a confession may be threatened from two sides: the subject-matter may be insufficient when the faults confessed are not sins, but mere imperfections, involuntary human shortcomings; or there may be a lack of contrition, when, instead of true sorrow, the penitent inadvertently has only a semblance of con-

trition, as may happen in case of petty faults. If, to avoid these dangers, we confess some serious fault of our past life, in order by this means to assure the validity of the Sacrament, it is necessary to make before and in confession an act of contrition for the sins previously confessed. Former acts of contrition are of no avail for a valid absolution *hic et nunc*. It happens sometimes that penitents, either at the suggestion of the confessor or upon their own initiative, decide at the conclusion of their accusation to add some grievous sin from their past life. In this case an act of contrition must be made and this sin must be included therein before absolution is given, else the accusation will be without influence on the validity of the Sacrament.

CHAPTER VI

THE EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE

UNLIKE contrition, confession, and the purpose of amendment, the examination of conscience is no essential part of the Sacrament of Penance, but merely a preparation for its reception.

Are we obliged to make an examination of conscience when we employ confession as a means of spiritual progress, and if so, how grave is the obligation? Let us examine this question, in order that we may realize fully the liberty we enjoy in this kind of confession.

The chief purpose of the examination of conscience usually made before confession is to recall to mind the sins which must be confessed or which are necessary for an accusation. Now there is no obligation to confess any but mortal sins. The obligation to examine one's conscience before receiving the Sacrament, therefore, is greater or less in proportion as it is probable or improbable that one is guilty of a mortal sin. If the probability that *no mortal* sin has been committed since the last confes-

sion becomes a moral certainty, then no examination of conscience is necessary. When the penitent has committed only venial sins, *one* such venial sin will be sufficient matter for confession, and since the penitent may easily find some venial sin without examining his conscience, he can receive the Sacrament validly and worthily without a previous examen.

Whoever, therefore, goes to confession once a week, or every two weeks, and has carefully complied with his various obligations in the meantime and avoided mortal sin, strictly speaking does not need to make an examination of conscience. Whoever goes to confession once a month and is not conscious of a mortal sin, should make some kind of an examination before going to confession; but this is not a strict obligation. The case is different, however, with those who go to confession but rarely, or, if they confess often, are negligent in living up to the requirements of the faith. A lukewarm and careless life makes a grievous offense against God quite possible, and if such a one would go to confession without making an examination of conscience, he would through his own fault run the risk of omitting a mortal sin.

Hence, many of those who go to confession frequently, have satisfied the duty of examining their

conscience before confession as soon as they have discovered *one* venial sin. Whatever further efforts they care to make are a matter of counsel or zeal.

Of course, no one will be satisfied with an examen whose sole object is to discover any sort of fault. Beyond this point the prescribed examination of conscience has for its purpose to produce in us that profound self-knowledge which will alone enable us to receive the Sacrament of Penance with the greatest profit. Hence, when making our examen we must proceed as follows:

We must first of all review our past life and discover against which precepts, how often, and with what degree of malice we have sinned, by thought, word, and deed, against God, our neighbor, and ourselves. We must critically examine our daily devotions, the entire sphere of our ordinary duties, our dealings with our fellowmen, all our thoughts, inclinations, and intentions with which we are accustomed to move. Led by the spirit of faith, we will then discover in what we have failed against God by omitting our obligatory prayers, by saying them with voluntary distractions, by abusing the name of God, by ingratitude, by being dissatisfied with the dispositions of Divine Providence, by being faint-hearted and despondent, by showing indifference towards God and inordinate love for the things of this

world. Add to this our shortcomings in regard to our fellowmen shown by unkind thoughts, by a want of friendliness and readiness to serve, by stubbornness, obstinacy, defiance, impatience, quarrelsomeness, annoyance and tormenting, by touchiness, by a desire of revenge, by proud and overbearing thoughts, by speaking with contempt of others, by sham indignation and hypocritical piety, by adverse criticism, by rash judgment and idle gossip. Finally, how we have sinned against ourselves by excessive self-love, by sloth, by an effeminate life, by remissness in fulfilling our duties, by want of care for our family, by vanity and pride, by immoderate worry about secular affairs, by petty acts of dishonesty, by a lack of truthfulness, by dissatisfaction and fastidious, fussy, exacting ways, by sensuality, etc.

Two important remarks must be made here. In the first place it is not necessary in *each* confession to review all the acts by which we may have committed a venial sin. This would prolong our examination of conscience unnecessarily. Everybody is aware of his own infirmities and also knows which sins he is less prone to commit. On the other hand, however, it would not be wise always to restrict the examination to a few points, to the neglect of important parts of one's interior life. Many who go to confession frequently fall into this habit. Ordi-

narily no objection can be raised against it; but in the long run this practice can hardly be followed without detriment. The soul is liable to be thrown into disorder if we do not keep a close watch over ourselves everywhere and at all times. Imperceptibly the one or other evil propensity insinuates itself into the heart; bad habits are acquired; old faults, thought to be long dead, revive; important duties and religious practices are imperceptibly neglected; despite external regularity one grows spiritually lukewarm. The beginnings of evil passions hide under seemingly harmless trifles. Thus, oftentimes unobserved, a multitude of faults grows up in us, which we are but too prone to overlook to our detriment if we do not examine our conscience thoroughly from time to time. To guard against such spiritual deterioration, various religious communities have introduced monthly spiritual exercises, which are used to make a general examination of conscience. In like manner those who live in the world may from time to time examine their conscience in order to prevent aberrations from the path of virtue.

Having searched our past and thus obtained an insight into our present spiritual condition, having momentarily recalled to mind what perverse inclination is the chief source of our failings, we must take

a second step and ascertain which part of our moral life is most in need of reform. This question should never be omitted in our examination of conscience, because on it depends the specific character and aim of the good resolution we are about to make. That resolution should either refer to the sin which we have most frequently committed, or to our predominant fault. If we feel inclined to amend our life in any other respect also, we may do so. At the close of our examen we must determine which faults we are going to confess, and make these the object of a special purpose of amendment.

The ordinary examination of conscience required for weekly or fortnightly confession does not entail much time or labor. It may become a very difficult matter, however, when the penitent encounters certain impediments which deprive him of the attention, insight or readiness necessary for knowing or understanding the true state of his soul. The number of these impediments is not small.

Merely in passing I wish to call attention to superficiality as an impediment to a proper examination of conscience. Many penitents content themselves with ascertaining merely the grossest faults which lie at the surface as it were. Some seem unaware of breaches of brotherly love except when they have committed a coarse, and intentional of-

fense; the thousands of petty acts of bitterness, the stinging remarks, the faultfinding, caviling, and complaints with which they torment others mean nothing to them. Some perceive that they are negligent, confused, and distracted, but they are not aware that beneath all these faults is hidden a strong, unmortified sensuality. Others for a long, long time overlook the beginnings of a more or less dangerous passion. How many Christians have fallen under the spell of inordinate love of pleasure, vanity, ambition, pride, sensuality, envy, suspicion, pessimism, greed, hardheartedness, etc., simply because they never seriously examined their conscience. Let us not merely skim the surface when making our examination of conscience, but let us occasionally go down into the depths, into the secret passages of our heart, where evil intentions and erring sentiments are at work to turn us from the path of virtue.

The second impediment to a proper examination of conscience is scrupulousness. We said at the beginning of this chapter that most of those who frequently go to confession in order to make progress in the spiritual life are not obliged to examine their conscience every time they go, but have done their duty when they have discovered a single venial sin. One should think, therefore, that uneasiness and

constraint were altogether excluded from devotional confession. Nevertheless there are persons who are thrown into lamentable confusion by the mere thought of examining their conscience. Like birds caught in a sling, they become exceedingly alarmed as soon as they begin to look into their hearts. Their thoughts are confused, their judgment is obscured, inexplicable fear oppresses their heart. Their imagination is so befogged that whatever fault they have committed appears to them frightfully magnified. Petty failings assume the proportions of enormous crimes; the temptations which assailed them appear as so many mortal sins; petty faults suddenly seem to them burdened with "possible" grievous consequences because of the scandal they may have given; harmless actions now cause them the greatest remorse of conscience; even the good deeds which they performed were bad, because they "always" had an evil intention. They imagine they have received "all" the Sacraments sacrilegiously. At times such frightened souls see nothing at all because they are blinded by terror, and in their confusion are tormented by the apprehension that behind the impenetrable wall lurks a frightful monster, unknown to them. When these miserable souls, after a long agony, finally enter the confessional, their brain is fagged out, their mind dry, their joy dead,

and the Sacrament of merciful love becomes a torment to their souls.

Not all who come to confession with such fears are scrupulous. Sometimes the cause of their perturbation lies in ignorance, in false notions of goodness or evil, in a conscience deranged by a bungling, narrow-minded training. This is not scrupulousness, but a malady less difficult to cure. The remedy is instruction. Sometimes these fears arise from a soul that is assailed night and day by fierce temptations, sinful thoughts and imaginings. It is chiefly temptations to blasphemy, doubts in matters of faith, or unchaste thoughts that distress such persons. In the heat of the struggle a moment will sooner or later arrive when the soul, confused and exhausted, seems to relax for a moment and to give way to evil, whence there finally results a condition of insecurity and uncertainty from which even the wisest sometimes cannot extricate himself. These souls are not scrupulous in the proper sense of the term. Their fears are to a certain extent well-founded; it is good for them that they are afraid because fear causes them to walk more cautiously. They should not, however, become confused or disheartened when they have valiantly fought against evil. Not every momentary wavering in the struggle is sinful. Mortal sin requires attention and deliberation similar to

that necessary for any serious business. There is no such deliberation in the few confused minutes of momentary failure, and therefore we need not fear that the good will, which for so long a time has unflinchingly resisted the storm, has in those few brief moments been detached from God. Moreover, the circumstance that the apparent momentary yielding occurred in a moment of fatigue and mental relaxation clearly shows that there was no full deliberation. Such penitents may, therefore, rest at ease; as far as human reason can judge, "momentary yielding" is no mortal sin in one who prays much and fights courageously. Such persons may even draw greater confidence from their condition. The grace of God works in them more strikingly than in thousands of others. For whence, in spite of strong incitement to evil, comes to them this profound horror of sin, this dread of offending the Divine Majesty? Whence this unbroken will for virtue, this tenacity in offering resistance? Whence especially the victorious repulse of so many temptations? Whence this perseverance in goodness spite of everything? If God were not so visibly assisting them, where would they be? Therefore, let them learn from their distress to humble themselves and to seek union with God so much more confidently.

Scrupulousness proper has its origin in hazy, con-

fused judgments, weakness of the nerves, physical oppression, and persistent imaginings. There are persons in whom dissipation and scrupulousness go hand in hand. Of such we cannot speak in this treatise, being concerned solely with those who, in the judgment of the confessor, have no good reasons for their scruples. This sort of scrupulousness occasionally arises from pre-existing dispositions through no fault of the victim. In other cases the evil would not have been fully developed had the penitent manifested greater docility and less zealotry. Genuine scrupulousness cannot be cured by instruction. Scrupulous persons should take to heart the truths held up to them, and do this, too, more willingly and seriously than they usually do; but it is precisely this willingness which they lack. They are infatuated with their own folly; some even seem to consider that folly an advantage. This anxiety is often coupled with a Pelagian excess of zeal that refuses to be satisfied until all trespasses are expiated by the sinner's *own* efforts and nothing is left for the mercy of God to do. Others seek in confession too much their own comfort and too little God's pleasure. Many stubbornly persist in the delusion that if they could only succeed in confessing and repenting all their sins one single time, a holy peace would dawn upon them. Ah, these miserable crea-

tures will never succeed in attaining peace, for they distrust and suspect even the calm. Therefore, the confessor should again and again remind them of the simple teachings of the catechism concerning the requirements of a valid confession, and they should make earnest efforts to accept and obey these teachings, fully conscious that he who does what the Church requires, does enough. The confessor should repeatedly admonish such penitents to forget themselves and seek only God, with the conviction that our emotions amount to nothing if only God is satisfied with us. The confessor should limit the time which scrupulous penitents are to devote to their examination of conscience, the points on which they are to examine and to accuse themselves, the frequency of their confessions, and the number of their Communions. He should also instruct them to direct their efforts towards making a good purpose of amendment and carrying it into effect, rather than to seek completeness in their self-accusation, because this is an excellent means of regaining self-control.

All these means may gradually lead the penitent out of the labyrinth of scrupulousness; but only on condition that he obeys blindly and in all things. To accomplish this he must, of course, often do violence to his feelings. It will sometimes seem to him as if

the confessor imposed the renunciation of all his pet ideas, nay, demanded what is unjust. However, he should bear in mind that the only remedy for his malady is strict obedience. He should offer the violence he must do to himself to God and ask for relief and strength, constantly bearing in mind the words of Holy Scripture: "Obedience pleases God more than sacrifice" (1 Kgs. XV, 22).

Above all, scrupulous persons should pray. Scrupulousness is an evil, and we all know that in spiritual distress we should call upon God for help. When did a scrupulous person ever hit upon the idea to pray for relief from his unfortunate condition? Confessors should, more than is usually done, impose on scrupulous penitents a daily prayer for relief from their morbid condition. Such a prayer not only has supernatural efficacy, but it also exerts an excellent natural effect by imparting to the penitent the conviction that his manner of acting is wrong. It is not easy for a scrupulous person to see that his anxiety is nothing but folly; but as soon as he realizes this, he is half cured.

A serious impediment to an effective examination of conscience is excessive self-love. What prevents so many people from acknowledging themselves in the wrong, is the dread of making a sacrifice. In their innermost heart they hear the voice which tells them

that a certain affection is sensual, that a certain action is dictated by petty revenge, that their behavior is foolish and stubborn, etc. However, the idea that they must give up what they have so long cherished is repugnant to their self-love and they turn a deaf ear to the inner voice and almost intentionally delude themselves in regard to the actual state of affairs.

And how many have been deceived by pride! There have been men who, although their wrong was plain to everybody, defied the judgment of all sensible people and the will of their ecclesiastical superiors by stubbornly insisting that they alone were right. Impervious to instruction, incapable of any doubt regarding the justice of their conduct, they persisted in their wrongdoing and thus became the lamentable victims of pride. Pride does not always assume such dimensions; but it is at work wherever men examine their conscience and renders true self-knowledge very difficult. It tries to gloss over and excuse where it cannot deny. Humility, on the other hand, is truth. Let us examine our conscience in all humility, and when self-love and pride try to deceive us, let us remember that the truth alone can make us free.

Other impediments to a good examination of conscience are the errors of self-deception which precede it. A man may harbor very serious misconcep-

tions regarding himself. He may form an incorrect estimate of his character. He may regard reprehensible actions as permissible, look upon sensual affections as pure and holy, and imagine that he is on the right path of spiritual development, whereas in matter of fact he has taken the wrong direction. When have we reason to fear that we are entangled in self-deception? We should not raise this distressing question without cause. As long as we are calm, as long as we do our duty without too great hardship, as long as we live in peace with our fellowmen, and as long as our superiors are satisfied with our behavior, we need not worry. In the following cases, however, we have cause for serious self-examination:

1) When we feel that our zeal and piety are abating. Perhaps we have lost our first zeal, not only apparently, but in reality, and half unconsciously commit faults that injure us.

2) When coldness, aridity, and despair invade our mind for a long time. Such conditions are often trials from above; but sometimes they are a punishment for certain faults which hinder God from communicating Himself to us in the same measure as before.

3) When we feel uneasy in conscience concerning certain affections and friendships, in particular

when an inner voice at holy Communion urges us to strip off such fetters. Let us heed this voice and examine ourselves honestly and rigorously in the presence of God, without regard for the desires of nature, to ascertain whether those affections do not arise from the flesh and lead to the flesh. If we cannot arrive at a clear conclusion in this matter, let us consult our spiritual director, whose judgment is free from selfishness and whose decision should govern our conduct.

4) When we get into persistent difficulties with our superiors and associates. When two quarrel, one may plead that the other is at fault. But when one cannot clear up his differences with his superiors—this applies above all to religious—the trouble almost invariably lies with himself. And when anyone has a falling out with all of his associates and makes enemies of them, he must seek the cause in himself. He should then institute a serious examination of conscience and honestly inquire whether his unbearable stubbornness and haughty character, or his whimsical, morose, high-tempered, melancholic disposition, or his sharp tongue and disdainful caviling are not the causes which make it impossible for him to live in peace with his brethren.

5) When people generally begin to make unfa-

vorable remarks about our conduct. We are often told that we must not fear the judgment of men; but neither may we ignore it altogether. It should at least stimulate us to reflect upon ourselves, especially when parents or superiors, or calm and clear-sighted friends subject our conduct to unfavorable criticism, humility and wisdom demand that we employ such judgment to advance in self-knowledge. Even the criticism of opponents and envious persons should not be disregarded altogether. Hatred has keen eyes, and its malicious tongue often speaks truths which our friends do not dare to utter because they are bitter. Let us, after our anger has cooled down, examine the criticism of our opponents with the greatest objectivity, even if it at first blush appears to us ever so untrue, ever so unjust. When our opponents charge that we have acted uncharitably, ungratefully, or unjustly, let us seriously examine ourselves whether our intention was pure, and whether, if it was, the injury was nevertheless contained in it.

We have particular reason for careful self-examination when people begin to find fault with our character. When they charge us with having a violent temper, with being imperious, harsh, or capricious, fickle, stubborn, slovenly, giddy, or soft, let us examine ourselves! Perhaps we believe our-

selves to be models of meekness, love, and humility; but we may be mistaken. We may have changed imperceptibly. Perhaps at one time we were good-natured lambs, but have turned into bristly porcupines. Everybody has noticed the change, and it is high time that our attention is drawn to it and we subject ourselves to a course of severe self-discipline. Self-deception would be less frequent if men, when examining their conscience, would honestly reflect on what others, especially their superiors, say of them.

In all such cases we should possess at least enough humility and prudence to reckon with the possibility that something may be wrong with us. Let us not be satisfied with an ordinary examination of conscience, but go to the root of things. Let us examine our entire conduct, what we have said, what we have done, the motives which guide us, the sentiments which move us. In order not to overlook anything, let us study the examination of conscience given in our prayerbook. Let us search for the evil with the same care that a conscientious physician tries to diagnose a disease. If the investigation discloses no guilt on our part, and if this opinion is confirmed by the confessor, then we may confidently proceed on the road we have taken. But if we discover that we are on the wrong road, let us at once turn back and

take the right path, thanking God that He let us see our mistake in time.

Whenever the obstacles to a good examination of conscience are removed, the way to the truth will be open. But the truth itself has not yet been grasped. The self-examining mind needs a ray of supernatural light to illumine it in its task. The more enlightened we are, the more clearly we shall perceive the extent of our sinfulness. Whoever looks into himself with the eyes of purely natural knowledge will discover only a small fraction of the large number of faults which he habitually commits. Who will give us that delicacy of feeling in supernatural things which discovers a fault, no matter how small it may be or how much it may conceal itself under all kinds of masks? Whence shall we take the enlightenment that will make us understand in how many respects our conduct displeases God? An acute and most tender sensibility in matters good or bad is necessary to make a fruitful examination of conscience, and these gifts are the fruit of a pure life, of a profound piety, of a tender love of God. The soul is enlightened concerning itself in devout prayer, in meditation, in pious reading, in listening to the word of God. God must speak to a man if his eyes are to be opened regarding the extent and the enormity of his

sinfulness and misery. Many wounds of the soul are so deeply hidden that we should never discover them if the Lord did not, so to speak, lay His finger on them. It is not to be wondered at that most men have so little insight into their actions! When do they enter into themselves in silent recollection and listen to the Divine Teacher, who is alone able to divide light from darkness and to bring clearness into the chaos of good will and evil inclinations, of honest endeavors and miserable weaknesses, of pure intentions and dark impulses? Therefore, all those who go to confession frequently should, if possible, often engage in spiritual reading. The words of Our Lord, the teachings of the Church, the example of the saints will give us a keen eye for the finer distinction between right and wrong. Through them the soul becomes endowed with the clairvoyance of the children of God.

Thus the examination of conscience must be nourished by a devout life, and a devout life finds its necessary corrective in the examination of conscience. Thus shall we grow in self-knowledge, and, through self-knowledge, in humility and confidence in God. Perfect self-knowledge, therefore, stands not at the beginning, but at the end of the path of virtue. Ah, how many youthful illusions must life shatter before we understand that, without Christ, we

are completely submerged in the misery of sin! And even then there remains enough self-conceit—until we shall see all truth, including the truth about ourselves, in the mirror of the eternal godhead.

Before entering upon the examination of conscience, we should call upon God for assistance. Devoutly recite the prayer to the Holy Ghost. Add a fervent "Hail Mary." Charity, beginning to stir in our hearts, nowhere finds better care than in the keeping of the Mother of Our Lord. Now begin your examination. It should not occupy more than half of the entire time devoted to preparation; for weekly confessions it need not last longer than five or six minutes. When one is very busy, it may be made even shorter. In very urgent cases, when our conscience is in good order and only a few faults come to our mind which we would like to confess, it is permitted to go to confession without examination of conscience. As a rule we should not busy ourselves too long in searching for sins committed.

In frequent confession it sometimes happens that, despite careful search, we cannot discover sufficient matter. Such is often the case after a period of strenuous work during which a person scarcely has had time to reflect on himself. After such a week one may feel that one has been remiss in fulfilling all one's moral and religious duties; however, these

imperfections appear excusable because of the pressure of circumstances. The same happens when a period of great zeal is followed by a relaxation of interior impulse. In such a transition there exists a condition in which nothing is altogether good and nothing altogether bad. A slight want of care and attention plainly manifests itself all around; the soul feels this, but no longer possesses sufficient energy to carry the matter to perfection, and no tangible, serious single fault exists.

When in such a case an examination of conscience does not result in something tangible, the reason almost invariably is want of enlightenment and relaxed zeal. No man is sinless. Where we discover *one* fault, God sees a hundred. Therefore, the failure of an examination of conscience to unearth any faults can call forth a feeling of vanity only in one who is spiritually blind. In serious-minded persons it arouses a feeling of profound dissatisfaction with themselves. They know the saying of the saints, that the purer a man is, the more reasons for humility he will find in himself. As a rule, the saints discovered much to criticize and improve in themselves. But even they sometimes experienced a failure of memory and at the moment of confession could not recall the faults they had discovered and repented

of the day before. St. Gertrude repeatedly complains of this.

When, therefore, it happens that nothing will come to our mind on making an examination of conscience, let us not omit the accustomed confession; because we surely cannot make any headway if we, poor and feeble as we are, abandon the fountains of grace. If we do not find any "real" fault, we may secure the validity of our confession by accusing ourselves of a sin of our past life. However, in this case a close inspection will invariably reveal that we have not followed the words of Holy Scripture: "Before prayer prepare thy soul: and be not as a man that tempteth God" (Ecclus. XVIII, 23).

He who goes to confession frequently may make his examination of conscience from memory. However, it is advisable, from time to time, to use a printed form, in order not to overlook an important point. The same purpose is served by reading the Rules of Life for Devout Christians, written by St. Francis de Sales.

The examination of conscience before confession is made much easier by the habit of the daily examen. This daily examen is best made in connection with night prayers, in the following manner: Review the day's doings, hour by hour; think of the

places where you have been, of the work you have done; recall to mind the persons with whom you have associated and what was the subject of conversation. Examine how you recited your prayers. If something unusual excited you during the day, whether pleasant or unpleasant, see whether you remained within proper bounds.

The examination of conscience is greatly facilitated by a fixed daily routine which causes our life to move within a well-defined circle of duty and work.

Pave the way for your examination of conscience by a sincere evaluation of your conduct. Whenever you feel that you have not acted right, do not shut your eyes, do not try to deceive yourself; but with clear knowledge and stern sincerity admit *that* you have failed, and *in what* you have failed. Condemn the deed and the inclination from which it proceeded. It will then be readily recalled on the day of confession.

In examining our conscience, let the zeal of the children of God be our supreme judge. Let us sincerely expiate that in which we have failed, and from the bottom of our heart detest sin where and under whatever form it may conceal itself. Let us neither palliate nor excuse any fault. Let us bewail the never-ending infirmities of our moral life, but res-

olutely persevere in the long and tiresome labor of training ourselves for Christ.

Let the spirit of liberty peculiar to the children of God have a part in this work, so that our view may be unobstructed and far-reaching, that our mind may remain calm and joyful, and that the evil we have done be not exaggerated by false notions nor nurtured by neglect.

In examining the conscience, as throughout confession, let all things be done for the love of God, and nothing out of fear or under constraint.

CHAPTER VII

CONTRITION

CONTRITION is true sorrow and detestation for sins committed. Every sin we commit is an offense against God and an evil to our soul. How deeply, then, should we not deplore our sins! We are sorry if we have offended our relatives or friends by a foolish or wrong deed. We keenly regret it when we have injured ourselves or by some fault have lowered ourselves in the esteem of our fellowmen. Venial sin is a wrong and injurious deed of this kind, with this difference, that it injures not our earthly well-being, but our eternal life. How, then, can we be indifferent in such an important matter? Of course, we cannot perceive the sadness of God on account of the insult offered to Him, as we can perceive the tears of our loved ones on earth; the damage done to the soul by sin cannot be felt with our hands, as the wounds inflicted on the body. But the eye of faith can see it clearly, and man becomes aware of the evil consequences of venial sin when, after having committed such a sin, he feels

himself farther removed from God, more unclean, more sluggish, more sensual. For these reasons he is filled with remorse and detestation when he remembers the venial sins he has committed.

In eliciting contrition, the will turns away from its evil deed. Contrition alone makes it possible for God to pardon sins. Therefore, there can be no forgiveness of sins without some kind of contrition. Express and formal contrition is an indispensable part of the Sacrament of Penance, without which absolution cannot be validly given.

Contrition is called a remorse of the soul. It is, therefore, essentially an act of the mind and especially of the will. It originates in the soul when, enlightened by faith and moved by grace, we realize the heinousness of sin. The will resembles a clear-thinking and calm man who, on beholding something unsightly or harmful, at once turns away from it in disgust. He acts quickly and with determination, but calmly, without sudden fright or great excitement. It is thus the will acts in contrition. Faith and reason make it plain how detestable is the sinful deed performed; the will perceives the wrong and its own liability to punishment; it turns away in disgust from its deed and resolves not to repeat it in future. This is contrition on the part of the will—nothing tangible or sensible, an altogether internal

and spiritual act performed by the highest faculties of the soul.

Besides this contrition of the will, so necessary for the valid reception of the Sacrament of Penance, there is another contrition, that of the heart, a sensible sorrow, which is not necessary, but may play an important rôle in the work of penance by impeding or promoting it. At times the contrition of the will finds a strong echo in the heart and in such cases may grow so strong as to affect the body, even to the shedding of tears. There is something peculiar about the human heart. It is a reservoir of the infinite desires and longings of the soul, from which proceed involuntary, inexplicable, uncontrollable flashes of joy and sorrow, longing and sadness, love and hatred, fear and hope, whenever the soul comes into contact with external objects through the senses or the mind. Our emotions are enigmatic: at times they long to ascend to sublime heights with the spirits of light, and then again they creep on the ground like a beast. At times they are aglow with divine love, at times they act like a blind instinct. The heart is divided like the soul: it is the soul, created to the divine image, which, when its peaks are lit up by a ray of eternal beauty, thrills with bliss and goes into ecstasy at the thought of God and Heaven; it is the soul, desecrated and corrupted by

original sin, which, when that ray has died away, follows paltry instincts and eagerly seeks after that which is low and earthly, as if she herself were but dust of the earth. So inconstant, so incalculable, so contradictory is the human heart.

The emotions of the heart are not directly under our control. They rise spontaneously and disappear in the same way. We may exercise an influence over them by reflection and consideration, but they will not let themselves be dictated to. Will and heart do not always follow the same course. That the heart obeys no orders, we learn only too often in our meditations and prayers and when receiving Holy Communion. How much care do we not sometimes bestow on eliciting a sentiment, yet it will not come, where at other times a flood of sentiments bursts forth from hidden sources, rushes upon the soul, and floods the palpitating heart, seeking relief in tears and lamentations!

Sensible contrition may come from various sources and is of unequal value. Sometimes the emotion of the heart has a natural cause in an impressionable temperament; it may even originate in a purely physical disposition. At times it is unmistakably the effect of divine grace. This may be seen in the lives of the saints. God gave these chosen souls an extraordinary insight into the wickedness

and injurious effects of venial sin, which aroused in their purified hearts a profound consternation and a deep sense of pain at the thought of having offended Him. St. Stanislaus Kostka and St. Aloysius, St. Gertrude, St. Catherine of Siena, and St. Teresa of Avila bitterly bewailed their slightest faults. But even the saints did not experience such a remorse at all times; they too had periods of dryness in which their heart was destitute of a feeling for heavenly things, just like our own heart, and they had to be contented with contrition of the will.

Corresponding emotions in connection with contrition are not to be despised, especially if they are deep and lasting and of supernatural origin. As the waves lift and carry along a boat, so the emotions lift and carry along the resolutions of the will. When the will and the heart move in the same direction and everything seems to co-operate harmoniously under the guidance of reason enlightened by faith, man performs miracles of zeal and energy. All great conversions took place under the impetuous force of this combination. Are they not high points of the interior life when ardent sentiments of divine love raise our resolutions to heroic endeavors? Would that we were always worthy of such grace! The *Imitation of Christ* (Book 1, chap. 21), shows us the

road that leads to contrition. Let us follow it persistently and courageously.

On the other hand we must be careful not to make our repentance dependent on sentiment. Palpable remorse is by no means an essential part of contrition. Good resolutions can be strong and determined without sensible sorrow. Then, again, there are people who have an abundance of tears, but little strength. Repentance depends on the will, not on sentiment. Will and intellect, not feeling and sentiment, constitute a man. It is a mistake, nay a misfortune, to erect the structure of one's moral life on sentiment. Those who do this are unstable, irresolute, whimsical, lack strength in willing, consistency and steadfastness, are fickle and easily discouraged, at one time elated and full of courage, at another sad and dejected, not seldom extremely unhappy. In going to confession, too, we must be careful not to become dependent on our sentiments. Sensible contrition, though desirable, is not necessary, and its absence is no sign that we have no contrition, and we should be very careful not to make our confession depend on sensible contrition.

Contrition is a supernatural sorrow of the will. As such it must be based on considerations of faith, not on natural motives. We must be sorry for our sins either because we have offended God, or be-

cause we have sustained supernatural losses. We must detest sin for the love of God, or for the fear of God, or because of our eternal salvation, if our contrition is to be pleasing to God and a fit means of expiating and blotting out our sins. The sentimental ebullitions of many penitents are far removed from true supernatural contrition. These excited penitents act from wounded self-love rather than from higher motives. The excitement and want of moderation in their sorrow are alone sufficient to render it suspicious. The sorrow of the saints, despite its strength, was always calm; there was about it nothing confused and anxious, nothing depressing and discouraging, no trace of anger or indignation. A feeling of contentment over the humiliation that had come to them always accompanied their contrition; they loved to mingle with their complaint over the wrong committed the words of Ps. CXVIII, 71: "It is good for me that thou hast humbled me, that I may learn thy precepts." Compare with this the lamentations of some penitents. They are excited, they "feel unhappy." Is it humility accusing itself, or offended pride making a complaint? These penitents do not consider that they have offended God, but think only of the misfortune that has befallen them. They had imagined themselves to be incipient saints, raised far above such accidents, and, having

stumbled and fallen contrary to all expectations, they feel very unhappy. Their contrition is nothing but wounded self-love, their sorrow lacks the supernatural element. Instead of complaining, they ought to ponder the words of St. Paul: "Most gladly will I rather boast of mine infirmities, that so there may rest upon me the strength of Christ." (2 Cor. XII, 9.)

Whenever we look for supernatural motives in order to excite in our soul true sorrow for venial sins, we shall find so many of them as to be almost embarrassed.

The first and best motive is that which moves us to repent of our sins purely for God's sake, and thus leads to perfect love and perfect contrition. Perfect love and perfect contrition are enkindled in the heart by meditating on the perfection, the beauty, and the benignity of God; but above all by considering His goodness and love, diffused in our soul by thousands of benefits. The Catechism of the Council of Trent beautifully expresses this idea as follows: "When we call God immovable, unchangeable, eternally the same, we justly confess that He is faithful and conclude from this that we must believe what He says. And whoso considers His power, meekness, and beneficence, must he not place all his hope in Him? When man meditates on the riches of goodness and love which God has poured out upon

us, would it be possible for him not to love God?" The "riches of His goodness and love" God has poured out upon us in a most touching manner in the Incarnation, when, to save us from sin, death, and hell, He left Heaven, came down upon this earth, and, for our sake, became a poor, lowly infant; when during the thirty-three years of His earthly sojourn He went about as the Good Shepherd seeking to save His lost sheep; when He taught and admonished us with ineffable patience, and, finally, when He redeemed us by His cruel death on the cross. Thinking of ourselves, did He not provide for our souls with the greatest possible kindness, when He adopted us in preference to so many others as His children; when He bestowed tender care upon our spiritual life from the days of our infancy, such as only a mother bestows on her child; when He did not withdraw His mercy from us, though we turned away from Him by sinning and stubbornly and maliciously courted destruction; when, finally, He manifested His love for us in Holy Communion. No one need fear that the consideration of such goodness will result merely in an imperfect love and contrition. True, there are authors who teach this; but they are altogether mistaken. Of course, there is a consideration of God's beneficence and a gratitude that is selfish because

it looks at the gift, not at the kindness of the giver. But what noble heart can ignore the giver when a gift is bestowed with such exceeding kindness as the Son of God shows in bestowing His gifts? St. Augustine graphically describes how love arises from love: "Nothing stimulates love more than the knowledge that we are loved. This is true even of human love. For those who love and long to be loved make every effort to manifest the greatness of their love; and they act and speak as if they had a right to be loved in return. Thus the indifferent heart is moved when it feels that it is loved; thus he who loves will be induced to love more ardently when he sees his love reciprocated." The same, he continues, may be said of the love of God. Christ, suffering hardships and dying on the cross for our sake, had no other purpose in view than to make us feel His love and thereby stimulate our love. Can it be that He was mistaken in thus wooing our hearts? Can it be that all He did and suffered was fit only to awaken in man a world of selfishness? If we are not willing to assume this, let us unreservedly devote ourselves to contemplating the wonderful works of divine love and kindness and never fear that we shall be incited to a purely selfish gratitude.

In eliciting contrition it will be advisable also at times to turn our attention on ourselves, on the pun-

ishment which God imposes on our soul because of venial sin, and on the havoc which venial sin creates in the soul. In detail we may be guided by the following motives:

1) Consider that every sin, even the least, is an act of disobedience and an insult to God, your supreme Lord, to whom, as His creature, you owe obedience and loyalty.

2) Consider that to offend God, the supreme and most amiable good, spells an ingratitude on your part that is so much worse in proportion as you have received from Him more favors than thousands of others.

3) Behold with sorrow the state of defilement in which your soul is in the sight of God. True, His love still embraces you as before: but your conduct displeases Him and because of it He looks upon you less benignantly than before.

4) Remember the losses which sin has inflicted upon you—in grace, in insight, in strength and consolation in prayer. Behold how your conscience has been dulled, how it has become more difficult for you to do good, how you sigh and groan under the yoke of Christ, which in reality is so sweet and light.

5) Fear the growing strength of your evil inclinations and the revival of temptations. And when you notice with alarm that as your sensuality waxes

stronger your will-power begins to weaken, seriously consider that venial sin, when committed without concern, tolerated without anxiety, and expiated without fervor, will surely lead to mortal sin.

6) Fear the hidden decrees of God, who turns away from the ungrateful, rejects the barren, vomits from His mouth the lukewarm because they are unbearable to Him. When you notice that your sins leave you indifferent, reflect on the words of the Apocalypse: "I have against thee that thou hast left thy first love. Remember, therefore, whence thou hast fallen, and repent and do the former works: but if not, I will come to thee, and I will move thy lamp out of its place, unless thou repent" (Apoc. II, 4–5).

7) Regret that you employ the time which is left for you to acquire merits and expiate your sins here below, for increasing your guilt before God.

8) Consider that, if you do not do penance for your sins, you are preparing for yourself a dreadfully long and dreadfully hard period of suffering in Purgatory.

9) Above all, lift up your mind again and again to your loving Lord and merciful Redeemer, whom you repay with coldness and ingratitude for all that He has done for you. Oh, how dearly He has loved you and still loves you! Look at the crucifix and ask

Him why He, the Son of God, hung for three long, anxious hours on the cross, and in view of such love deplore your heartlessness. Cast yourself before the tabernacle and realize, if you can, how many good things have come to you from there, and admit that you should not have acted as you did. Think of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of His desire to love men and to be loved by them in return, and humbly beg His pardon that by your sins you have made it almost impossible for Him to accomplish His purpose. In this manner endeavor to enkindle in yourself once more the waning love of God to that degree of intensity of which St. Thomas Aquinas says that it is the appointed antidote against venial sin. From a heart thus inflamed will come the contrition and purpose of amendment necessary for the validity of the Sacrament of Penance.

Contrition is a remorse of soul felt because of sins committed. In confession received as a means of spiritual progress, when there are only venial sins, one's contrition need not extend to all the venial sins committed; but it *should* comprise all venial sins intended to be included in the accusation, and if the absolution is to be valid, it *must* include at least one of them. This requirement may be fulfilled in a twofold manner: first by a *special* act of contri-

tion referring expressly to the sins selected for confession, and, secondly, by a *general* act of contrition covering all venial sins committed by the penitent, no matter what their nature.

In purely devotional confession, however, such a general act of contrition suffices only when it is so fervent and strong that it blots out in the will every attachment to the definite venial sins which we intend to confess. This is not always the case. As little as every degree of charity is strong enough to restrain the will from all failings, just so little is every general act of contrition capable of detaching the will from all venial sins. Acts of love and a general act of contrition of such strength and intensity are no ordinary gifts, least of all in the case of lukewarm and slothful penitents, whose weak will seldom arouses itself to a resolute resistance to petty sins. This act of contrition may suffice to exclude all fully deliberate venial sins, but it will not exclude those sins of negligence which require for their eradication greater care and determination. Now, if their accusation comprised only faults of the latter description, the validity of the Sacrament would be endangered, because contrition would not have obliterated attachment to them.

Therefore prudence demands that the penitent

should not stop at a general act of contrition, but proceed to elicit a special act. Nor should he be satisfied with the formula: "Of *these* and all the sins of my life," etc., which includes both acts of contrition, the special and the general. At least he should see to it that the formula corresponds to the reality, that is to say, that he make an act of contrition especially for "these" sins. It is, however, advisable to say expressly: "O my God, I am sorry that I said my morning prayers so negligently during this week; O my dear Saviour, I regret that on such and such an occasion I uttered words offensive to those about me; O my God, I am very much displeased that I have again spoken vainly and complacently about myself!"

To make a special and express act of contrition for the sins confessed lends to our penance greater depth and seriousness. This practice is to be recommended also for another reason, namely, because it imparts greater fruitfulness to the Sacrament of Penance, and because sorrow for very definite sins is the only favorable basis for an effective purpose of amendment.

If you wish to make a special act of contrition for a definite venial sin, it may be done in different ways. Either your detestation may be directed against the entire class of sins to which the one com-

mitted by you belongs, *e. g.*, in case of a proud word, against pride in general. Or your sorrow may be directed exclusively to that single fault. Or you may regret the evil propensity which caused it. Or you may regret your negligence in allowing yourself to commit that particular sin. Or your contrition may refer to the disregarding of the precautions you had taken to be preserved from a relapse into this very sin. Or you may deplore the increasing number, the alarming frequency, the growing seriousness of the faults which come to light in an especially glaring manner in that particular transgression. In all these cases the will turns away from the sin committed, and nothing remains to interfere with God's pardon.

An act of contrition, made with due care, comprises the following parts: (1) An attentive consideration of one or more motives of contrition; (2) their application to the sins to be confessed; (3) a resolute act of the will breaking with these sins and all attachment to them; (4) a glance at the evil inclination from which these sins proceeded, in order to reject and detest them also.

Of all the acts of penance necessary for the valid reception of the Sacrament, contrition is the most important. It constitutes the very essence of penance and the natural root of the purpose of amendment.

Therefore we must by no means treat contrition lightly, but give to it sufficient time and attention. The act of contrition ought to take up about one-third of the entire time devoted to preparation, *e. g.*, five minutes in a preparation lasting a quarter of an hour. Rather shorten the examination of conscience than detract from contrition. Let us always bestow the proper care on contrition by seriously considering one or several motives of sorrow and applying them to the sins to be confessed, then expressly and resolutely renouncing those sins, and finally condemning in ourselves the evil propensity which is their source.

The great importance of contrition for the valid reception of the Sacrament of Penance is justly appreciated by the faithful, and most penitents regard it very seriously. Superficial minds, however, are apt to make the mistake of stopping at a vague sentimental sorrow and do not turn away from sin resolutely enough. On the other hand, there are persons who are over-particular about contrition and worry so much about it that they cannot come to a finish. The cause is partly ignorance (they do not know how to make an act of contrition), partly a desire to feel a sensible sorrow, partly anxiety to make sure of contrition before entering the confessional. To these

we tender the following advice: If contrition gives you trouble, first recite a fervent prayer and then act according to the directions given above; when this is done, be calm, for you have contrition; He who in His infinite love has called you to confession, has heard your prayer and blessed your endeavor.

If there is question of a sin of which you would very much like to repent, but seemingly cannot, confidently include it in your accusation. Where there is a sincere will to repent of a sin, the ardent wish to do so is itself contrition.

Those who seek overmuch for sensible contrition, should consider the following thoughts: If you readily experience a sensible contrition in your repentance, you are pleased; but if you must make great efforts to elicit an act of contrition, your repentance pleases God. In the former case God has, as it were, helped you to contrition at His expense, in the latter you do penance at your expense, which is quite in order. Hence, if you feel the bitterness of repentance, do not complain; you do not go to confession to enjoy pleasant things, but to atone for the evil you have done.

We shall never obtain certainty regarding our contrition by tormenting ourselves. The best sign of

a true contrition is a firm purpose of amendment, and the best sign of a firm purpose of amendment is the trouble one goes to in order to carry it out. That is the best way to arrive at certainty. When, therefore, the time allotted to contrition has passed, turn your attention to the purpose of amendment. After confession, however, be all the more intent upon keeping your good resolutions.

Nourish your contrition by leading a contrite life. He who comes to confession with a lukewarm heart and indifferently, will, of course, experience no small difficulty when he tries to elicit true contrition for petty faults. Whence shall he take that high degree of charity or fear or that zeal for his spiritual welfare? True, the merciful Saviour will restore his soul to life if he asks Him for this favor; but he will be put to great trouble and exertion. He, on the other hand, who is accustomed sincerely to repent each fault as soon as he becomes aware of it, and to beg pardon for each venial sin as soon as he realizes that he has fallen, will not find it hard to make an act of contrition when he goes to confession. Hence the advice: If at any time you have failed to do the will of God by gratifying a perverse inclination, expiate your fault by penance and turn your will back upon God.

The act of contrition must be made *before* con-

fession, or at least *before* the priest pronounces the absolution. The penitent disposition which remains suffices for the valid reception of absolution. It is, therefore, not necessary to repeat the act of contrition at the moment of absolution, though the pious custom of doing so may be retained.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PURPOSE OF AMENDMENT

IT is the teaching of the Church and the belief of all the saints that the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance is an excellent means of acquiring a high degree of sanctity and of making rapid progress in amending one's life. Experience shows, however, that many penitents who go to confession every week, make very little progress, nay, are less perfect than before. Whence this contrast? Why does the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance so rarely prove effective as a means of purification and preservation from sin? Evidently for the reason that it is not received in the right way, but serious mistakes are made in connection with its reception.

A number of such mistakes have already been pointed out. We have dwelled especially on the fact that indolent penitents often content themselves with a general and very weak feeling of contrition when going to confession, and do not take the trouble of eliciting an express and special act of

contrition for the sins they intended to accuse themselves of. This is the principal mistake made in confession. Other mistakes are made in relation to the purpose of amendment. The neglect of this element is the second chief cause why many confessions produce so little fruit. That the purpose of amendment is the most neglected part of confession is fully attested by experience.

The greatest authority on the religious life of pious Christians, St. Francis de Sales, says: [1] "Many confess their venial sins superficially and from sheer habit, without giving any thought to amending their lives." What he means is that many confess without a purpose of amendment. But where there is no purpose of amendment, how can improvement be expected? And if there is no purpose of amendment, what about the validity of the absolution? The Moral Theology of Elbel-Sporer (III, 9, 4, 14) says: "If we ask ourselves why so many penitents, even religious, make no progress after going frequently to confession, we must admit that the principal cause is that their purpose of amendment is too vague and indefinite. The resolution 'to avoid all these sins' is necessarily weak and powerless, for everyone can see that it spells the impossible. And there is reason to fear that often the absolution is

[1] *Introd. to a Devout Life*, Book II, chapter 19.

invalid and sacrilegious on account of insufficient contrition and a weak purpose of amendment." In my opinion the judgment expressed in the concluding sentence of this quotation is too rigorous. No sacrilege is committed except when one knowingly and with grave carelessness receives the Sacrament of Penance without contrition and a purpose of amendment. This is not a frequent occurrence, because most penitents are in the habit of including a sin of their past life, for which they are truly sorry and which they sincerely intend to avoid. But what the two theologians whom we have quoted say of a neglected, faulty, and inefficacious purpose of amendment is only too true, as all confessors can testify. Therefore, if we wish to receive the Sacrament of Penance with greater fruit, we must make a better purpose of amendment. We shall explain our meaning more fully.

The purpose of amendment is the expression of the will to avoid sin. It is as it were the future aspect of contrition. In making an act of contrition the will turns away with sorrow and detestation from the sins committed; in forming the purpose of amendment it assumes a hostile attitude towards possible future delinquencies. The purpose of amendment, therefore, is not a mere opinion, nor a feeble wish, nor even an ardent desire; no, it is an act of the will,

which becomes a fact when the will, in determining the aim, begins to choose and arrange appropriate means for carrying it out.

The purpose of amendment is a necessary condition for the validity of the Sacrament, because it is an essential part of contrition, which the Council of Trent defines as "a sorrow and detestation on the part of the soul of the sins committed, combined with the intention of sinning no more."

However, no explicit resolution is necessary for the validity of the Sacrament; the so-called virtual resolution suffices. This is the teaching of the majority of theologians and recent moralists. The virtual purpose of amendment is nothing but the act of contrition itself, or, more precisely, the hatred of future sin resulting from contrition. If this hatred remains unexpressed, we have a virtual purpose of amendment, but if it is interiorly or exteriorly formulated in words, we have an explicit or formal purpose of amendment. The virtual purpose of amendment, therefore, is in itself not an act of the will, but is wholly included in the sorrow and detestation of sin. The teaching that the virtual purpose of amendment suffices for the validity of absolution is practically reliable. Hence if anyone, before going to confession, only made an act of contrition, but no purpose of amendment, he need not be disturbed

concerning the validity of the absolution. He had a virtual purpose of amendment, and that was sufficient. However, all penitents should be advised not to content themselves with a virtual resolution. The reason is this: in confession, especially when received frequently, it is of great importance, not only that we are somehow validly absolved from our sins, but we must receive the Sacrament of Penance in such a manner that an earnest and lasting amendment results therefrom. The fruits of penance, however, are secured far less by a mere virtual than by an explicit purpose of amendment. Hence it is by no means a matter of indifference whether, in confession, we content ourselves with an act of contrition and the aversion against sin virtually contained in that act, or whether we add to it a particular, explicit, and very definite purpose of amendment. I do not mean to say that a merely implicit purpose of amendment has no educational value. Where there is genuine contrition, a profound and true remorse for the sins committed, there will also be complete readiness to combat evil propensities, even without an explicit resolution to that effect. But generally speaking it remains true that a purpose of amendment is more efficacious and more lasting in proportion as the will to avoid sin is more clearly expressed and set forth as an independent

act. A clearly formulated purpose of amendment enters more vividly into the conscience, impresses itself more deeply on the memory, and is more readily recalled in the hour of temptation. A purely virtual resolution, on the other hand, binds the moral consciousness less strongly and is easily forgotten. Therefore, it so often serves as a mask for half-willing, for want of earnest endeavor. Hence, if one wishes to go to confession not only to be once more absolved, but to overcome one's evil inclinations, to amend one's ways, let him constantly strive to attain an independent, well-considered, and precisely formulated purpose of amendment. For many this is the only way by which they can rise from the morass of lukewarmness and indifference to the heights of earnest moral endeavor.

As contrition must proceed from supernatural motives, so the purpose of amendment must have its roots in faith.

Careful consideration must be bestowed upon the question how far the purpose of amendment must extend in order that the Sacrament of Penance may be validly received, when there is question of venial sins only.

In confession the penitent must resolve to avoid not only the mortal sins he has confessed, but all mortal sins without exception. This is usually ex-

pressed by saying that the purpose of amendment must be general and absolute. When there are only venial sins, the purpose of amendment needs to be neither general nor absolute, but it suffices for the validity of the Sacrament that the penitent resolves to avoid the *confessed* faults. Nay, it is enough if he resolves to avoid only *one* of them. Nor need he make the resolution to avoid this particular sin altogether and absolutely; for the validity of the confession it is enough that he propose to *combat* one of the sins confessed by using the proper means with the intention of reducing the number of his faults. That is all that is required for the validity of the Sacrament. Due respect for the Sacrament of course demands that the purpose of amendment should embrace all the sins included in confession, for, as St. Francis de Sales justly remarks, "it is an abuse to confess small or great sins if we do not intend to avoid them." [1]

Hence, it would be sufficient for the validity of confession to resolve: "I will diminish the frequency and gravity of these venial sins," or: "In combatting the evil inclination which lured me into these sins, I will employ this or that means," or: "I will avoid the occasion which led me to sin," and so on.

[1] *Introd. to a Devout Life,* II, 19.

In all these resolutions the heart declares its readiness to struggle against the sins committed.

To preclude misunderstanding the following explanation should be added. The above-mentioned limitation of the purpose of amendment to one or several species of sin must, of course, by no means be understood in this sense, that the penitent may reserve to himself a certain number of sins which he intends to commit in future. This would be a voluntary attachment to sin, which would most probably neutralize the effect of contrition. The above-mentioned limitation only means that the penitent does not rest content with ordinary good will, but intends to concentrate his entire attention on combatting certain faults. In regard to these he does not resolve to avoid a definite number, but simply declares: As often as the temptation to these sins assaults me, I will combat it by employing suitable means. But since my proneness to evil is so strong and my will is so weak, I do not know whether I shall succeed in every case. No man has it in his power to avoid all venial sins. But I hope, by frequently going to confession and making a firm purpose of amendment, to attain at least a diminution of my faults by falling less frequently, and less grievously if it be the will of God. This is the true

interpretation of the words of St. Thomas: "To repent of venial sins it is necessary that the penitent propose to avoid each particular sin, but not all, because this would exceed our ability in this life. He must, however, resolve to make an effort to reduce his sins; else he will run the risk of sliding backwards, because he gives up the desire to go onward." [1]

Our purpose of amendment, whether it regards mortal or venial sins, must be firm and efficacious; That is to say, it must, at least at the moment of confession, possess so much force as is required to begin the combat against the sins and the evil inclinations from which they sprang; for the effect of the purpose of amendment in devotional confession is to combat venial sin.

This firmness and efficacity may be drawn from different sources. Chief among these is the hatred of sin. The more clearly a man discerns the ugliness of even the smallest sin, the more determined will he be in resisting evil. This hatred of sin is most effective when backed by an ardent love of God. It is the ardour of divine love which inspires the heart with a longing for spotless purity and awakens the firm resolution to keep a strict watch over the corrupt and corrupting propensities of nature; it is

[1] *Summa Theol.*, 3a, qu. 87, art. 1, ad 1.

the fervor of divine love which arouses in man a joyful readiness to use all available means and make every possible effort to offend God less and to become more worthy of His love. Here we again encounter the idea of the Angelic Doctor that ardent love is the antithesis of venial sin. Let us beseech Our Redeemer to give us a fervent love out of the infinite bounty of His loving heart.

Contrition and fervent charity are the interior sources of the firmness and efficaciousness which characterize every true purpose of amendment. Its efficacity, however, depends upon how it has been constructed, whether it was well weighed, prudently designed, and practically worked out. In proportion as the purpose of amendment is general and indefinite, the prospect of keeping it out is less favorable. We must also consider the "how" and the "wherewith." Therefore, after having defined the object of our purpose of amendment, we should also specify the means by which we intend to meet temptations to sin. There is that evil concupiscence which has again and again caused us to relapse; how shall we render it harmless? There are the occasions of sin to which we so easily succumb; what preventative shall we use to avoid them? There is our own inconstancy, our weakness, which so easily relents and does not carry out our good resolutions; by what

means can we secure constancy in our warfare against sin? We should seriously consider the possibility of a relapse and ask ourselves: How shall I expiate any possible act of disloyalty and immediately resume the interrupted combat? This prudent foresight should assist human infirmity in order to bring the purpose of amendment to an effective issue.

Against these requirements of a firm and efficacious purpose of amendment many mistakes are committed in practice.

First mistake: Too little care is bestowed upon the purpose of amendment. How do penitents ordinarily prepare for confession? After invoking the Holy Ghost, they spend much time in examining their conscience and eliciting an act of contrition. When they have recited the usual formula of contrition, they are ready to enter the confessional. But what about the purpose of amendment? Well, at the end of the formula expressing contrition it says: "I firmly resolve, with the help of Thy grace, to amend my life and never to sin again." Was that the purpose of amendment? Yes, that was all there was to it. The penitent paid no more attention to this part of the Sacrament, which simply meant that he made no particular, explicit resolution to sin no more, but contented himself with the virtual resolution of

amendment contained in contrition. St. Francis de Sales was quite right when he asserted that many penitents confess their venial sins in a perfunctory manner, without any serious intention of giving them up. But this perfunctoriness is a source of evil. Let us once more recall the teaching of the moralists: "Without an explicit purpose of amendment the fruit of the Sacrament of Penance will always be scanty," says Lehmkuhl.[1] Let us not pass over the purpose of amendment so lightly! True, genuine contrition may supply the explicit purpose of amendment, but it can have this effect only if it is profound and fervent. As a rule, confession without an explicit purpose of amendment will be incomplete. Let us place our purpose of amendment on its feet so that it may move along; let us, by prudent reflection, give it eyes that it may see; let us, by explicit formulation and frequent repetition, give it strength and endurance, that it may prevail in the combat. Otherwise it will never result in overcoming our faults.

Second mistake: In regard to a large number of sins confessed we have no purpose of amendment at all. This mistake is made in many ways. Sometimes even well prepared and serious penitents accuse themselves, among other sins, of petty transgressions, in respect to which they have hardly a

[1] *Theol. Moralis*, II, 298.

semblance of a resolution, much less an earnest purpose of amendment. This is human frailty and can hardly be avoided without very close attention. It is still worse if a person knowingly accuses himself of a fault which he does not intend to avoid. This is an abuse of the Sacrament of Penance, which fortunately does not occur often. More frequently it happens that a person falls into the habit of thoughtlessly rattling off in confession a list of habitual sins, which he has never seriously resolved to correct. This reprehensible habit has been castigated above. It can only be condemned, as St. Francis de Sales condemns it. This particular fault is, alas, of frequent occurrence. Practically every confessor has to deal with penitents who commit and confess the same faults week after week the same number of times, without ever making a serious attempt to amend their conduct. Their behavior demonstrates that they are not seriously resolved to get rid of their faults. They have acquired the habit of confessing this or that sin, and go on confessing it without reflection. And thus it may happen that they confess a certain sin—and apparently are sorry for it—at one moment, and half an hour later commit it again without any qualms of conscience. Is not this an abuse? Does it not involve disrespect towards God and the Sacrament? If such penitents would make

their thoughtless accusation to some human judge instead of to God, I am sure that judge would soon grow tired of them. If they would repeat the same performance year in, year out, without making the slightest effort to amend their life, I think the human judge would not be slow in saying to them: "Why all this tomfoolery if you do not intend to reform? For ought I care, stay what you are and what you confess yourself to be—a gossip, a carping critic, a defamer, a slanderer, an unbearable, whimsical creature. But please, do not offend me with your show of repentance which has neither truth nor earnestness." Must not God judge us similarly if we habitually confess in a perfunctory manner faults which we are not at all minded to avoid? Let us, therefore, avoid this mistake. Among the sins we confess there are surely some for which we are sincerely sorry and which we wish to avoid in future. Let us confess these. If there are others which we have neither the strength nor the inclination to combat, let us omit them from our confession; or, still better, let us pray assiduously until we are sorry for them also from the bottom of our heart. If humility urges us to inform our confessor of unrepented faults, let us do this *after* confession proper.

Let us confine our accusation to those sins which

we honestly detest and sincerely intend to avoid. Our striving after perfection can only gain by definitely separating the faults we propose to correct from those about which we intend to do nothing. It is not easy to get around the words of St. Francis de Sales that it is an abuse to confess a sin, either mortal or venial, without intending to avoid it.[1]

The third mistake which penitents are apt to commit in regard to the purpose of amendment is that they propose to do too much. Nothing is so significant of the fact that most penitents meditate too little on their resolutions than the unlimited extent and apparently absolute character of their good resolutions. There are some who thoughtlessly read the formula usually found in prayer books at the end of the act of contrition: "I firmly resolve to amend my life and to sin no more." This formula is really aimed at mortal sins. In confession employed merely as a means of spiritual progress it could only mean: "I will not commit any more venial sins." Most penitents do not intend to make any such heroic resolution. Others are quite serious when they promise God not to offend Him again by venial sin. But even they have no valid resolution to this effect because they have no conception of the far-reaching nature of such a resolution.

[1] *Introd. to a Devout Life,* II, 19.

The absolute will never to commit any more venial sins, presupposes an extraordinary fervor. It demands a complete renunciation of all voluntary attachment to any petty sin and a constant warfare against all infirmities and perversities of the human heart. It presupposes a tremendous energy and an extraordinary willingness to make sacrifices. Where these conditions are wanting, the resolution not to commit any more venial sins is merely a pious wish, which is, indeed, worthy of praise, and which we should harbor at all times, but it is not sufficient to insure the validity of the Sacrament of Penance. Most of those who say: "I will sin no more," are far from having attained to such an exalted degree of heroism. For this reason it is not advisable for most penitents to stop at the general resolution: "I will sin no more."

Pedagogical considerations also make it appear less expedient to take the absolute resolution "I will sin no more" as the purpose of amendment, or at least as the sole purpose of amendment, in confession. The purpose of amendment required by the Sacrament should at the same time serve as the basis and starting-point of a course of self-discipline. This purpose, however, is not attained by a too extensive resolution. One who undertakes too many things at once will hardly ever finish any. So also

in the process of self-discipline. If we attempt to overcome *all* our infirmities and correct *all* our faults at one fell swoop, we run the risk of frittering away our strength in fruitless endeavors, unless extraordinary help comes to us from above. There have, it is true, been saints who undertook the most daring tasks; but these saints were real giants and could take gigantic loads upon their shoulders. Whoever, without deception, feels himself interiorly related to the saints, may form the resolution never again to commit a venial sin as his exclusive purpose of amendment; but let him take heed that his conduct does not belie his words. He who feels that he is full of infirmities and prone to sin should limit his good resolutions in such a way that he can hope to carry them into effect.

What limits, then, shall we set to our purpose of amendment, so that it may meet all requirements which respect for the Sacrament or regard for its educational effects impose? The answer to this question depends on the extent of our self-accusation in the confessional. If we are accustomed to include in our accusation only a small number of sins, *e. g.*, two or three, we may be content with a single good resolution embracing specific faults. But if the desire for a general purgation urges us to confess our sins in detail, we ought, as a rule, make

two distinct purposes of amendment—one general, comprising all the sins confessed, the other special, singling out one or two faults which we propose to make the object of special endeavor. By the first we show due respect for the Sacrament, which forbids us to accuse ourselves of sins which we do not intend to give up; by the other we give a fixed aim to our efforts for amendment. By the first we declare to God that we are determined to walk circumspectly and to resist to the best of our ability the attacks of evil, especially to avoid wholly voluntary venial sins. The second, on the other hand, is the weekly programme, which, when carefully carried out, will lead us beyond our present moral condition to a higher state of purity.

When a gardener undertakes to put his garden into proper condition, he will not begin to dig simultaneously on all four sides, but will carefully take one bed after another; without, however, losing sight of the whole. Whenever any weeds grow too rank, he will pull them up, in order that they may not disfigure his garden. But while weeding and digging and preparing and sowing, he will finish one bed at a time. Thus we, too, should proceed in the work of tilling our soul. While never losing sight of the whole—for the weeds of sin grow only too fast—we must concentrate our efforts at one point. Hence,

the practice of making double resolutions of amendment is to be highly recommended.

Let us, therefore, after making a general purpose of amendment, select one from among our faults, say, the worst one, or the one which we are more urgently impelled to avoid, and make it the object of a special resolution. Let us, for instance, resolve to say our night-prayers with particular care until our next confession, or more willingly to obey our parents, towards whom we have been unusually disrespectful, or to avoid violating fraternal charity by sins of the tongue, etc. We must then apply all our efforts to carry out this special resolution. This second purpose of amendment is to be, as it were, the touchstone by which we prove to God and ourselves the genuineness of our contrition, the sincerity of our repentance, the earnestness of our purpose of amendment, and the strength of our love. Let the work of self-discipline until our next confession consist in faithfully and resolutely putting this resolution into practice.

In the fourth place comes the mistake of not practically developing our purpose of amendment. Our good resolutions frequently resemble plans which remain mere sketches. The details are wanting; there are no specifications or rules for overcoming obstacles. We resolve to correct a certain fault, but we

give no thought to the how and the wherewith. Our good resolutions, therefore, lack feasibility. A good resolution is like an important undertaking, or a projected building, or a military expedition. He who wishes to build a house, consults an architect, prepares his materials, and engages workmen. He who goes to war sees to it that his soldiers are well equipped, his finances in good condition, his generals efficient, and his allies ready to aid him. Thus everybody acts who is about to undertake a serious task. Why, then, do we not act in this manner when we make our purpose of amendment? Why do we not think of the obstacles to be overcome, of the means apt to improve us, of the help that we can obtain from God, from the saints, and sometimes also from our fellowmen? If our good resolutions were backed by more will-power, we would surely not be satisfied with such empty platitudes as, "I will sin no more," nor be surprised if we fail at the very outset.

How many are there who make a grievous mistake in this regard, especially when confessing mortal sins? Here is a man who has lived in habitual sin for years. He has committed the same sin so and so many times every week. The confessor asks: "What do you propose to do about it?" The penitent is not prepared for this question, but finally

blurts out: "Well, I am resolved to sin no more." "Is that all you have proposed to yourself to do?" queries the confessor. "Yes," the penitent replies, more or less surprised. The confessor questions further: "Have you not thought of the means which may help you to sin no more? Did you resolve to avoid the proximate occasion of sin? Of being more watchful in the hour when the temptation usually assails you? Of praying and receiving the Sacraments more frequently? Of not losing courage after the first fall?" The answer as a rule is an awkward "no." And when the confessor continues to ask whether the penitent in making his purpose of amendment in former confessions, ever seriously thought of the means to be taken to ensure perseverance, he will receive the same answer. How can such resolutions cause a change in the life of a habitual sinner? It is with such resolutions that the road to hell is paved, as the proverb has it. Accordingly, it will not appear strange that there are Christians who, in spite of going to confession four times a year, remain mired in the same vice, and, having reached old age, possess no greater power of resistance than they had in their youth.

A similar experience can be made in regard to devotional confession. Here the purpose of amendment nearly always is the meaningless phrase: "I

firmly resolve to amend my life and to sin no more." "And is that all you propose to do?" Yes, of course, that is all. What else should the penitent resolve to do? In a certain sense he has already made up his mind to do the most difficult, the most perfect thing that it is possible to do. Nevertheless, his purpose of amendment, comprehensive though it appears to be, is empty and weak. In exercising the will, everything depends on the practical side. A ruler who conceived the plan to subject all the nations of the earth to his sceptre, without considering the means with which it can be done, would undertake to do less than he who intends to punish his dog and lays the whip in readiness in order not to forget it.

If our purpose of amendment is to produce fruit, we must not rest satisfied with the vague and impractical resolution: "I resolve to sin no more," but must elaborate that resolution as a general works out a plan of attack. We must think in advance of preventive, precautionary, healing, and expiatory means and arrange for their proper application. Suppose we have resolved never again to take part in uncharitable gossip about absent friends. How is this resolution to be put into practice? The "source" of this sin is that vain self-complacency which feels thrilled when it has an opportunity to vent its indignation at the faults and mistakes of

others. For he who is indignant at a thing, shows that he believes himself above such a fault. To oppose this evil tendency of my perverted heart, I will read every day the passage in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. VII, 1–5), where Christ condemns hypocritical fault-finding. The proximate occasion of this sin are certain friendly gatherings. In order not to relapse into my former fault, I resolve to avoid these gatherings. If I cannot avoid them, I will look for a preventative. On my way to these gatherings I must pass a certain church. I resolve to enter that church for a moment and renew my resolution in the presence of the Eucharistic Lord. But perhaps my propensity to gossip and criticism will, despite this precaution, lead me to take part in a cowardly attack on the honor and good name of others. Here an adequate expiation must be prepared in advance. As a punishment I will deny myself this or that indulgence, and, moreover, on the next occasion, I will make an effort to say something good of the person whom I have calumniated, provided that the poor victim will not thereby be again made the butt of uncharitable gossip. Another example. My special resolution is: "I will say my prayers with greater attention and devotion. An excellent means to this end is to prepare myself properly for prayer. The first act of preparation is recollection and the lifting up

of the mind to God. Therefore, when the time for prayer comes, I will lay aside all worldly affairs and ask myself the question: Who is He whose presence you are about to enter with your petitions? Another means to help us say our prayers more devoutly is to pray with a definite intention. Therefore, before beginning to pray I will henceforth consider for whom and for what I intend to pray: for my dear departed mother, who perhaps is suffering in Purgatory, and waiting for me to help her; for my son, who has drifted away from the faith and sorely needs my prayers; for my sick child; for myself who find it hard to surmount certain difficulties on the way to Heaven." Such thoughts move the heart and help us to pray with greater fervor.

In the art of concentrating our resolutions on a few definite points and of giving them a practical turn lies the secret of participating to the fullest possible extent in the preservative and disciplinary effects of the Sacrament of Penance.

Let us, therefore, resolve to apply greater care to our purpose of amendment. We have the weightiest reasons for this. In the first place a confession without purpose of amendment is invalid. Secondly, we easily run the risk of including in our confession a multitude of sins which we have never thought of committing, and this is an abuse. Third,

only an explicit and well-considered resolution is capable of producing, in connection with the Sacrament, those fruits of amendment and spiritual progress which are expected of it. These are some general motives for serious reflection on the purpose of amendment. To them must be added special motives for individual penitents.

Many Catholics never get rid of their fears regarding the validity of their confessions; they do not know, in particular, whether they had a true contrition or not, and would be overjoyed if some one could give them assurance on this point. Well, that is a comparatively easy matter. Sure signs of true contrition are neither the tears that are shed, because they may be the result of humiliated self-love, nor grandiose reflections made in connection with confession, because they may just as easily lead to conceit as to remorse. The only sure and easily detectable sign of true contrition is a firm purpose of amendment, faithfully carried out. This sign is sure, because whoever fights against sin, fears and detests it. This sign can furthermore be easily detected, the more easily in proportion as the purpose of amendment is more specific, that is to say, the more definitely the sin which we intended to combat was designated. For this it is not at all necessary that we succeed perfectly in carrying out the res-

olution; it suffices that we make an earnest effort to use the means provided, or any other means. The success depends upon God. This much anyone, even the weakest, may achieve. The purpose of amendment and its execution is for every timid penitent a means of demonstrating before God and himself that his confession was good.

One thing those who frequently go to confession must not forget. In order to have the necessary purpose of amendment in all our confessions, we must grow in interior strength and willingness to make sacrifices. A perfect purpose of amendment presupposes a strong will to reform. It is this we often lack. To carry into effect a good purpose of amendment requires efforts, sacrifices, self-denial. In these prerequisites men have at all times been deficient. In order to make a good confession, we must above all progress in that earnest piety which, according to St. Francis de Sales, never ceases to combat imperfections; which equips us with strength to carry on a continuous warfare against our perverse inclinations and evil habits; which teaches us how to overcome the temptations that usually assail fervent souls; which does not lose courage at the sight of its failings; which imparts to us the resolute determination to labor untiringly at our moral improvement; which will not cease to struggle until God

himself will give the signal and bestow the eternal reward.

In this chapter, as in the whole book, the necessity and value of the purpose of amendment has been strongly emphasized. This was not done because the purpose of amendment is more important than contrition. No; contrition and the purpose of amendment are one; but if they could be separated, contrition would have to be regarded as the more essential element of Penance. The sole reason why special emphasis was placed on the purpose of amendment is because experience teaches that the purpose of amendment is too often neglected in confession. Our object was to correct this negligence, because it is undoubtedly the reason why so many confessions produce less fruit than we have a right to expect.

CHAPTER IX

THE CONFESSION OF SINS

OUR Divine Redeemer made the forgiveness of mortal sin dependent on confession. True, it is possible to obtain pardon for mortal sin before complying with this obligation; but in this case the sinner is bound to confess his sins subsequently, if possible. The forgiveness of venial sins is not tied to a condition of this kind. Whoever of his own free will uses the Sacrament of Penance to blot out his faults, must confess them, because without accusation there is no judicial sentence. We gladly take upon us the humiliation incident to the confession of human weakness for the sake of the advantages connected with sacramental absolution.

Since we have already treated the question, how many and which of our venial sins we must accuse ourselves of in devotional confession, we need but to supplement what we have said above (Ch. VI) by a few practical counsels, and then add some remarks about the necessary qualities of our self-accusation and the form it should take.

Above all we must make sure whether it is better for us to stress in confession the idea of purifying our conscience and clearing it from sin, or that of reform and self-discipline. Accordingly we must decide either for the explicit or the restricted method of confession. If we prefer a middle way, let us be careful to make, besides the general purpose of amendment, also a special resolution, as explained above. The rules that should guide us in selecting the faults which we intend to confess may be formulated as follows:

In confession accuse yourself preferably of those faults which you need most to amend; for you will more readily overcome your present imperfections if you remove from your heart those faults which harm you most.

Accuse yourself of that sin for which you are particularly sorry; for it is always good to carry a profound contrition with you into the confessional.

Ceteris paribus, accuse yourself of your more important faults rather than of those that are less important. There are penitents who habitually pass in silence over important points of the spiritual life and occupy themselves with trifles. As long as they have only venial sins to confess, this procedure is perfectly legitimate, and it is, moreover, quite correct for anyone who has adopted the practice of

including only a few faults in his accusation to omit more important things in order to elicit a more effective purpose of amendment. But if a penitent in a detailed recitation of his sins regularly busies himself with peccadillos, but passes over his more serious faults without any higher motive, he creates the impression that he has very little compunction. There is also a certain amount of insincerity in such a confession. Can, *e. g.*, a religious be said to be sincere if he accuses himself, even to the smallest detail, of all sorts of external violations of the rule (*e. g.*, that he broke the prescribed silence, that he violated decorum, that he inadvertently sinned against holy poverty), if at the same time he regularly conceals frequent and flagrant acts of disobedience towards his superior, gross violations of fraternal charity, grievous neglect of his work? Or secular penitents, who are known as gad-abouts, confess every forgotten sodality prayer, but omit to state how often they have violated the precepts of Christian charity, shown disrespect to others, or sinned against the duty of truthfulness? If we are of a penitent disposition, we must above all be sorry for our more serious faults and, under ordinary circumstances, confess them in preference to the rest.

The penitential spirit should also urge us to con-

fess preferably the faults which humiliate us most deeply. To accuse oneself of petty faults may often be exceedingly humiliating, either because such petty sins betray an uncharitable disposition, or because the subject-matter is of a distressing nature. It is no exaggeration to say that it is easier for a hardened sinner to confess a dozen adulteries than for a pure heart that unwillingly cherishes a sinful affection, to admit: I have pressed another's hand with sinful affection. The feeling of shame arising from such an admission may be so overwhelming that only a profound sense of repentance can overcome it. Let us take upon ourselves such mortifications bravely, voluntarily, without compulsion, and, above all without interior disquietude, for we know that we are free to omit such sins from our confession. Let us confess them solely from a sense of remorse, considering that this humiliation is a worthy atonement for our faults, that it is wholesome for us, and that God will reward it with His grace. And when the confession of such a fault seems to us altogether too difficult, let us remember that the only difficult thing is the resolution to confess it; the act itself is easy. Let us dispel the bugbear created by our imagination, which pictures to us the humiliation far worse than it is. But once more: let us do

everything with the greatest freedom of spirit, and if we cannot force ourselves to do the difficult thing, let us humble ourselves before God, but let us not be disturbed in conscience.

As to the qualities of our confession, it should be above all humble. We should assume a modest posture and employ plain and simple language. The confessional is no place for vain ostentation and self-complacency. If the results of our examination of conscience have been meager, and our list of sins is short, we should not indulge in a feeling of vanity. Not all are able to overcome this temptation. One can plainly sense the self-complacency, especially in young people, when they finish their confession, consisting of a few trifling faults with a sort of triumphant "That's all." Well, life will sooner or later teach these youngsters humility. However, the fear of vain sentimentality need not stifle a feeling of joy and gratitude when one sees that he is making progress. These sentiments are quite compatible with true humility. To guard against presumption we need merely to consider what would become of us if God, who curbs the evil in us, would allow full sway to our passions.

It is also part of an humble confession not to endeavor to excuse one's sins or to "explain" them too

much. These "explanations," which the penitent believes to be necessary, are usually nothing more than thinly disguised excuses.

It furthermore belongs to an humble confession to accuse oneself calmly. Let there be no lamentations about one's inability to stop sinning. There is no need of this; especially not in the confessional. We all call ourselves sons of Adam and daughters of Eve and believe that the effects of original sin continue in us even after Baptism; daily experience shows that we can oppose to the rebellious instincts of our corrupted nature only an obscured knowledge and a weakened will. Is it surprising, under these circumstances, that we sometimes stumble in our warfare against temptation and that our strength is not always equal to our duty? Nobody is without such painful experiences. Why, then, do some remain so calm and dignified, whilst others make much ado and indulge in loud lamentations? The former have in mind God, whom they have offended, whereas the latter think only of themselves. That *they* had the misfortune to stumble is what so completely upsets them. Some penitents are, moreover, too reserved and modest to expose their sorrow in the presence of others, while others find pleasure in this exposure. If all penitents could forget themselves

and think only of God, how simple and easy would confession be!

Humility further demands that we confess *our own* faults, and not the faults of others. To speak of the faults of others in the confessional is permissible only for special reasons; namely, when it is necessary to make the confessor understand our own confession or when our own salvation is endangered by the sins of our fellowmen; or, finally, in order to ask for advice how to act when we are responsible for the behavior of others, for instance, of children and subjects. It is one thing to speak of the faults of others from a reasonable motive and quite another to accuse and condemn our fellowmen because of their faults. We have no right to condemn others, and it is very seldom our duty to accuse others. Least of all is this the proper thing to do in the confessional. Our guilt before God will certainly not be less because we can point to the fact that others are as guilty as we.

Our self-accusation should be clear and distinct. Give to your sins their plain English names and state their number. This means that we must not relate or describe our sins. Talkative persons easily fall into this mistake. State also the genus and species of your sins. Also in the case of venial sins it is well to men-

tion a definite number. That number need not be the total number of transgressions committed. We may content ourselves with telling how often we have committed the respective sin in a particularly wicked manner. When confessing temptations, tell whether or not you consented to them. The confessor will then be able to judge for himself whether and to what degree you are guilty.

Do not use prolix and useless phrases in confession. Do not mention things that are not sins, or whose second part neutralizes the first. Accusations of this kind are: I did not love God as He deserves; I was distracted in my prayers, but the distraction was not voluntary; I told a lie, but it was done inadvertently; and so forth. Though it is usually a tender conscience that manifests itself in such accusations, nevertheless, on account of their vacuity, they are out of place in confession.

Begin your confession with some kind of introductory formula. The shorter it is and the clearer it expresses the idea of humble self-accusation, the better. The following words are very commendable: "My last confession was made so and so long ago; since then I have committed the following sins." In some places the penitent adds: "I feel that I have committed no mortal sin; among my venial sins the following are the most serious." The self-accusation

should be finished with a few closing words. The simple "I have finished" or "I am through," which we sometimes hear, is inappropriate. Nor can the phrase "that's all" be approved. The closing formula should, of course, be short, but it must contain a prayer for absolution, else it would offend against the rules of etiquette. We may formulate it something like this: "This is all I have to confess, and I now ask for a penance and absolution."

After listening to our recital, the confessor as a rule at once imposes the penance. This should be humbly accepted and in some way acknowledged by the penitent.

At this point the confessor usually gives a short admonition. There are penitents who do not care whether they receive an admonition or not; all they want is to be absolved from their sins. Others there are to whom the admonition is the chief thing and who regard a confession without an admonition as only half a Sacrament. This view exaggerates the importance of the admonition and should be given up. The faithful should accustom themselves to be absolved at times without an admonition. The admonition prolongs the confession and considerably increases the physical and mental strain on the confessor. If the practice of frequent confession contin-

ues to grow at the same rate as it has grown since Pius X issued his famous decree on daily Communion, a regular admonition will become well-nigh impossible. Even now the priests in large city parishes groan under the increasing burden of hearing confessions, which takes away so much of their time and taxes their strength. Let us not ask anything unreasonable of them. When duty demands, they will gladly give salutary admonition, consolation, and encouragement to those who need it, and if they have time and strength left, they will also say an edifying and helping word to those who do not need it. For the rest, let the faithful adjust themselves to the new conditions created by the increase in the number of confessions. Let them now do the work themselves which was formerly done by the confessor, by being more careful in elaborating good resolutions and with the grace of God inciting themselves to good works.

Whilst the priest pronounces the words of absolution, silently renew the act of contrition. As has been said before, this renewal of contrition at the moment of absolution, while not necessary, befits the solemn moment when we accept the priestly absolution with a contrite heart.

It is the priest's not the penitent's business to con-

clude the confession. If he does this by pronouncing the Catholic salutation, "Praised be Jesus Christ," the penitent should respond: "Forever, amen." In this country the priest usually says: "Go in peace."

CHAPTER X

PUTTING THE PURPOSE OF AMENDMENT INTO EFFECT

WHEN we leave the confessional after receiving absolution our first care should be to give thanks to Our Lord and Saviour, to whom we are indebted for our deliverance from sin and the remission of a well-merited punishment. Once more, as so often before, He has restored our soul to purity and freedom by forgiving our sins. What would become of us without His mercy; what would be our lot without His sacred blood, which He shed for us so that we could be reconciled to His heavenly Father? If the innumerable sins and transgressions of which we have been guilty since the days of our childhood, oppressed our soul unexpiated, who could bear the burden? And if we would have to go through life with our conscience so heavily burdened, with no hope of forgiveness, who could think of death and eternity without utter despair? For without Christ we would be unable to make reparation for the least offense against God. As it is, we may heave a sigh

of relief and feel light-hearted and joyful like true children of God! After confession the heart expands in the sunshine of God's renewed love. A fresh purity is diffused in our interior, a new brightness beams into the soul from above. We feel as if we were born anew. How great the happiness derived from a good confession!

But the happiness that is imparted to us in the Sacrament of Penance was purchased by our Divine Saviour with unutterable suffering. "Without shedding of blood there is no remission," says St. Paul in his Epistle to the Hebrews (IX, 22). Our sins, too, demand bloody expiation. He who has sinned must expiate. We have sinned and *we* must do penance. And what penance! Hell loudly proclaims how mortal sin is punished. Purgatory tells us how God punishes venial sin. But merciful compassion moved the Son of God to take all our guilt upon Himself and to make satisfaction for all our sins by dying for us on the cross. There He shed the sacred blood which in every new confession relieves our soul from sin. O Lord, how ardent was Thy love, when, in order to save us, Thou didst suffer so intensely, and how great is the mercy which Thou showest us whenever Thou takest away our sins in the Sacrament of Penance!

After giving thanks, the penitent should perform

the penance imposed by the confessor. It is a very small matter when compared with the sins remitted. Perform it conscientiously, for satisfaction belongs to the integrity of the Sacrament. The penance imposed in confession has a sacramental character; perform it zealously, because, on account of its sacramental character, it has a greater atoning power and remits punishment more effectively than a purely personal penance. Perform it gladly, considering how much God has forgiven you and how little He asks in return. Perform it as soon as possible. For a good reason you may postpone it for a while, but not too long, so that the Sacrament may soon receive its finishing touch. Whoever deliberately or culpably neglects to perform the imposed penance—in case of a purely devotional confession —commits a venial sin; the validity of the Sacrament is not affected by the omission of the penance. If we have forgotten the penance without our fault, or if we did not hear it distinctly, we may ask for another in a subsequent confession.

When performing the penance, renew your purpose of amendment. When a general is about to begin a battle, he once more reviews his entire plan of action; he scans the position of the enemy and the arrangement of his own forces; he once more weighs all possible chances that might influence the

course of battle and takes the final measures which are to insure victory. When you have given thanks for the sacramental grace received, and arise to go, you resemble a general about to give battle. The enemy awaits you at the church-door. Therefore, review the situation once more, consider what you have resolved to do, think once more of the means for carrying out your good resolutions, promise God that you will endeavor to fight faithfully and bravely on the chosen battlefield until your next confession. And do not forget to ask Him for assistance. It is God who guides and directs all things. He is the Lord of our hearts, the bestower of victory, the source of all goodness—that which we possess, and that for which we are still fighting. Beseech Him not to let your zeal relax, but to give you constancy and strength of will, so that when your good resolution is put into effect, you may have the necessary vigilance and courage. Enter upon your duties and labors with a joyful heart, and confidently fight the battles of the Lord like the Machabees of old. The Lord will be with you.

Scrupulous persons after confession, instead of lifting their hearts to God in gratitude, easily commit the mistake of critically re-examining the several parts of their confession to see whether everything was done correctly. The confessor should

forbid them to do this and exhort them to direct all their care to the future improvement of their conduct. They on their part should strictly follow his directions and avoid the least deviation therefrom as a fault and a misfortune.

After we have returned to our daily routine, our chief task is to carry out the good resolutions we have made in confession.

To carry out a good resolution it is above all necessary not to forget it too soon. To forget a good resolution nearly always means to give it up. To do so occasionally is to pay tribute to human infirmity. But to forget our purpose of amendment frequently or regularly is a sign that we were not in earnest about it. How many are there who, a few minutes after confessing their sins, utterly forget the good resolution they have made! Whence comes this forgetfulness? Partly it is due to a lack of moral earnestness, partly to the fact that the penitent contented himself with a virtual purpose of amendment, that is to say, worked out no special purpose of amendment; partly to the vague, undefined, and meaningless form which the purpose of amendment so often takes. The memory and the imagination retain only that which is presented to the bodily and mental eye in definite form and distinct contours. The more formless a thing is, the more difficult will

it be to retain it in the memory. Only a special resolution, clearly defined as to its object, aim, time, and means, will impress itself deeply on the memory.

Let us never forget our good resolutions——— rather let us frequently recall them to memory. We should recall them first of all at the moment of Holy Communion, especially the Communion immediately following confession. Let us, so to speak, personally present our resolutions to Our Lord, let us offer them up to Him, let us ask Him to bless them and to grant us the victory in the warfare against evil. Then we should renew our good resolution every morning, either during our morning prayers, or at holy Mass, or when we receive Communion. When we make our daily examen in the evening, we should recall what we have resolved.

The chief thing, however, is that we think of our resolutions at the moment when they should be put into practice. We are, alas, not always successful in this. We are usually so distracted and our heart is so full of various thoughts that we recollect ourselves only with great difficulty. We had resolved to say our prayers devoutly, yet we began them hurriedly, and only when we are half through, we remember what at the start we had made up our mind to do. We had resolved to make a short visit to the

church when on the way to an afternoon party, to renew in the presence of Our Lord our resolution to be charitable towards others. But absentmindedly we passed by the church without entering, and recalled our resolution only when it was too late. Such is life. We say we can do so little against forgetfulness. But this is a mere subterfuge, by which we seek to cloak our interior confusion, which is partly our own fault. We *can* do something against this "thoughtlessness," and we *should* do something against it in order to attain to some measure of self-control. To accustom ourselves to severe mental discipline and to deliberate action will contribute powerfully towards this end. Let us banish from our mind all useless, brain-racking fancies and reveries. Let us keep our imagination in check and master our precipitate and excitable temper by confining our attention to our work and doing all things with a certain calmness. St. Francis de Sales once advised a nun never to act hastily, and added: I was never in a hurry. If to such mental discipline are added a constant realization of the divine presence and ejaculatory prayers, we shall surely overcome this so-called forgetfulness. For the rest, if out of forgetfulness we have neglected an opportunity to carry out a good resolution, we should renew it as soon as we become aware of the fact, and if we have failed

against it, we should bravely assume a self-imposed penance.

If an occasion arises to execute our purpose of amendment, and if we happily recall it to mind, let us faithfully put into effect what we have promised in confession, not only once, but again and again, until our next confession.

In carrying our good resolutions into effect, a great deal depends on the will. Would that we always had at our command a strong will that, so to speak, delights in testing its strength! Occasionally we have this strength at our disposal. There are moments when our heart, carried away by the brightness of interior enlightenment and sensing the sweetness of heavenly unction, feels its affinity with all that is pure and holy and turns with enthusiasm towards that which is good. Supported by such a disposition, the will casts off its lethargy and sloth and runs the course of virtue like a hero. Sacrifices and exertions are its greatest delight. It recalls all the great deeds which God has worked in His saints, and feels able to cope with the most exacting demands. With joy and ease it carries its resolutions into effect and perhaps regrets that it has not undertaken something greater and more difficult. But such moments of grace are not of everyday occurrence. Soon the fervor of enthusiasm cools down, the heart grows

duller and more earthly-minded, the *élan* of the soul slackens, and we find ourselves prone on the ground as weak and sinful humans. Good deeds become to us quite as burdensome as before, and our resolutions are equally hard to keep. We are in danger of giving up our moral efforts and of forgetting our good resolutions. Let us guard against this danger and cling tenaciously to our purpose! God wills it! Under no circumstances must we abandon our efforts at self-discipline. Let us strive to overcome these difficult moments, if need be, with utmost exertion.

It will be of great benefit to us at this point if we have a clear view of the value of those actions which are performed solely from a sense of duty, without enthusiasm and interior delight. Some think that acts of virtue, performed in this manner, are valueless. They confound enthusiasm with love, and think, because the work was done without any sensible participation of the heart, it cannot possibly be pleasing to God. This is a grave mistake. When does the sincere and strong will to please God show itself most clearly—when everything is easy, or when doing one's duty assumes the form of a task beset with difficulties? When is genuine self-denial and true devotion to God best put to the test—in the

hour of solace or in moments of affliction? True charity shows its mettle in times of storm and stress. Let us never persuade ourselves that the sensible participation of the heart constitutes the moral and supernatural value of an action. The heart, of course, must take part, but it is the heart in the spiritual sense, that is, first of all the will, and only secondarily our sentiments. Let us never take our sentiments for a gauge of moral perfection. Those are ideas cherished by youth. It is a peculiarity of the young to be swayed by sentiment in the interior life. A mature man emancipates himself from this bondage of the emotions. He is aware that in moral life sentiment is quite as often an impediment as a support in the practice of virtue. He, therefore, makes good use of its effects, but guards against letting it dominate him.

"Virtue is made perfect in infirmity," St. Paul was told from on high when his heart began to quake under the weight of afflictions and temptations. Our spiritual life slowly and laboriously makes its way through weakness and infirmity to the heights of virtue. And it is well that it is so. "If strength were always our share," says Bossuet, "we should soon grow proud and overbearing; therefore, God has found a middle way: He gives us strength, that we

may not perish in our infirmity; but lest we become overbearing in our strength, He wills that it be perfected by infirmity."

Therefore, persevere in your good resolutions, even if your heart apparently refuses to co-operate. Endeavor with every means at your disposal to increase the energy of your will. Fortify your conviction of the necessity of carrying your resolutions into effect. Consider how disgraceful it would be to give up your good resolutions because the weather-vane of your sentiments has veered, like a child that has no control over its will and knows nothing of consistency in action. Consider the consequences of your faint-heartedness. You will never succeed in life if your energy fails you at the critical moment. All graces will be wasted on you if they do not produce their noblest fruit—perseverance. If sacrifices frighten you, think of your Saviour and consider what sacrifices He made in practicing the virtue which you feel you are not able to practice. Think of the holy Communion you have received but a few hours ago, or which you are about to receive soon, and which obligates you to make sacrifices and to persevere. Stimulate anew your determination by such reflections, so that you may succeed in carrying out your purpose of amendment, and that you may, by courageously putting your good resolutions into

effect, gradually master your weakness and rid yourself of your faults.

If your efforts at self-control are to be a success, not only once, but always, much prayer and discipline of the will are needed. In all our natural and supernatural endeavors we must always bear in mind the words of Holy Scripture: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, from the Father of lights." We cannot take this truth too much to heart. What greater gift is there than that of courageous perseverance in good, a genuine and victorious love of God? Why, then, do we not pray more frequently for this generous, patient, self-denying love, which is the source of our longing for progress, the fount of our strength, the foundation of our perseverance in the service of God? Let us also exercise our will! Let us discipline this faculty of the soul by constantly exerting ourselves to break down the resistance which our indolent nature opposes to the performance of our daily duties! Let us freely and by our own initiative, in great things and in small, take upon ourselves those practices of self-denial without which the will can never control our ill-regulated passions! In dealing with those of our own household and with the world, let us restrain ourselves, and in all simplicity and naturalness cultivate moderation and nobility of bearing, so that our con-

duct may exhibit the traits of a cultured and refined Christian and never at any time lack polish or common sense. Let us leave no part of the day to chance, but adopt a well-arranged and methodic programme of action, large enough to leave ample room for the comforts demanded by nature and for the freedom of movement required by circumstances. Our daily regimen should be of sufficient elasticity to give to the will a firm support against the tendency to relapse into indifference and irregularity.

But if, in spite of our good will, we become unfaithful to our resolution and relapse into our habitual faults, what are we to do? Some persons in such a predicament are seized with a feeling of painful surprise and cruel disappointment, which easily grows into bitterness, nay even into spite against God. Such souls, at the moment of their conversion, when they were full of fervor and devotion, allowed themselves to be deluded by the idea that they would never sin again, that their life henceforth would be an uninterrupted ascent, a state of undisturbed peace. They forgot that the "old Adam" does not easily surrender. And now, when they again feel his power, they are terribly shocked. We must beware of such unreal notions. We are and shall remain vulnerable as long as we live. It is very well

and praiseworthy if, when making good resolutions, we say to God with unflinching courage: "I will sin no more." But it is neither wise nor humble to persuade ourselves that we shall never sin again. In the supreme and most sacred hours of life we must reckon with the possibility that we shall sin again. For this possibility always exists. It exists for all men in regard to venial sins; it exists also in regard to mortal sins for those who have long been the slaves of some vice. If such persons, when making a good resolution, honestly and sincerely admit: "I shall most likely fall again," they act more prudently than those who, by a sort of self-deception, persuade themselves that they will never sin again. It is a mistake to shut one's eyes to the realities of life. Therefore, when we have firmly resolved to sin no more, let us as boldly say to ourselves (I speak here of venial sins only): "I shall sin again." Self-knowledge produces humility and helps us to cling more closely to God. We shall not be astonished when, after hours of blissful grace, we again commit mortifying faults. St. Peter said to the Saviour: "Even if I must die with thee, I will not deny thee." Was there ever a resolution more sincere than this, made by a brave and enthusiastic heart a few minutes after first Communion? But that same evening it was said: "Then His [Christ's] disciples leaving

Him, all fled away" (Matt. XIV, 50). And the next day his courage had sunk so low that, frightened by the words of a simple maid, he denied His Master three times. After such experiences who has the courage to persuade himself: "I shall not fall again"? And who, when he has a relapse, will be too painfully surprised? Above all, let us not be discouraged after such a misfortune. The damage is not so great that it cannot be repaired. Once more place your will, which for a moment has followed an evil propensity, into the hands of God, and all will be well again. Have you so low an opinion of God's mercy that you fear He will harbor a grudge against you on account of your failings, when you are quick to do penance? Listen to what He said to St. Gertrude: "When anyone perceives a dirty spot on his hand, he washes it away at once; after washing, however, not only has the spot disappeared, but the whole hand is cleaner. Thus it happens that if a person commits a slight offense, but makes an act of contrition, he thus, by humility, becomes more pleasing to Me. Greater humility, more interior attachment to God: this is the only conclusion you should draw from your failings."

St. Francis de Sales beautifully teaches us how we may regain courage after a fall. He writes: "Whenever we commit a fault, let us at once ex-

amine our heart and ask whether it does not still entertain an ardent and definite wish to serve God. I hope it will answer 'yes' and will rather suffer death a thousand times than be false to this resolution. Let us then ask: 'Why do you stumble now? Why are you such a coward?' It will answer: 'I was taken by surprise, I know not how; I feel so dull at present.' Ah, our heart must be forgiven; it failed not because it was perfidious. We must correct it meekly and calmly, but not grow angry at it and thereby add to its confusion. We should say to it: 'Dear heart, take courage in the name of God!' Let us rise again and go ahead; let us be on our guard, and soar up to God, our Saviour. Ah, our soul deserves to be treated kindly as long as she does not deliberately fall into sin." Thus the gentle and experienced St. Francis de Sales.

As soon as we have summoned fresh courage, let us at once eject sin from our soul. Let us make an act of contrition or let us use one of the many other means designed to blot out venial sins. Especially let us, if possible, repair the damage by an act of the opposite virtue. Let us perform a slight penance which we have voluntarily assumed in case of a relapse. Such a penance should be some petty act, a short prayer, a little self-denial in eating, drinking, talking, listening, etc. A slight self-denial in

gossiping will hurt nobody. The essential thing is not the pain that we cause ourselves, but to enable the will, once more confirmed in God, to reassert its dominion over blind nature.

If we act thus after every fault which we commit against our purpose of amendment, we shall soon find that those who love God can draw spiritual benefit even from sin. Our sins will be no calamity for us, but rather occasions of performing acts of virtue and confirming our will in its adherence to God.

We must, however, act thus not only once, but always. Many pious souls are less frightened by a single relapse than by the slow progress they are making, and by the almost invariable number of faults and shortcomings they have to confess. The progress they make is too slow for them; they would like to reap after having spent so much trouble in sowing and cultivating the soil. To such we will address a few words. Holy Scripture says: "The life of man on earth is a warfare." Marvel not, therefore, that you must fight continually. "Expel nature with a fork, but somehow it will always return," says an ancient proverb. St. Francis de Sales writes: "Solomon says that the bond-woman who is raised to the rank of mistress, is an unbearable cad. A soul that has been the slave of evil passions for a long time, would be in great danger of becoming proud

and vain if she suddenly became sole mistress over them. This dominion must be acquired gradually, step by step, as the lives of many holy men and women, who spent years in attaining it, bear evidence. We must have patience with the whole world, and most of all with ourselves. As soon as you begin to exercise yourself a little in patience, everything will move along splendidly; for the meek and loving Redeemer, who has inspired us with an ardent desire to serve Him, will furnish us the opportunity to do so. He undoubtedly delays the hour of fulfillment, in order that it may be more beneficial for you; for behold, His loving heart calculates all events of this world and disposes them to the advantage of those who wish to submit without reserve to His divine love. The happy hour for which you long will come on the day which Divine Providence in the secret councils of His mercy has set aside for it." Equally practical is what he says in another place: "It is not possible for you to acquire dominion over your soul so soon and by your first effort. Be content with gaining a small advantage over your passions from time to time. We must learn to bear not only with our fellowmen, but also with ourselves, and have patience with our imperfections."

St. Teresa recognized very clearly that frailties

and imperfections will and must occur daily. She modestly says: "Because we are women, such things must occur." But men are no better. St. Teresa did not require too much of her nuns. "I do not say to you," she writes, "that no imperfections must creep into your life; but I do say that, when something of this nature occurs, we should take notice of the fault and realize that we have failed." She thinks that for many the sign of friendship with God is not so much that they do not stumble, but that their faults cause them genuine sorrow. Nay, on one occasion she makes bold to say: "Do not approach your confessor too often with the same faults. It is true we cannot live without committing faults; but change them from time to time, so that they may not take root." Thus St. Teresa boldly admitted the truth that, whilst we are weeding on one side in the garden of the soul, fresh weeds grow on the other.

However, lest these words, which make allowance for human weakness, become for some an occasion to relax their efforts in God's holy service, we will quote here also the admonition of St. Leo the Great: "He who has ceased to move towards God, has ceased to approach near unto Him." As long as we strive and make efforts, we shall come closer to God, even if appearances are seemingly against us, for God rejects no one who honestly seeks Him.

For the rest it must be said that occasionally, under an apparent standstill, nay, even under what appears to be retrogression, real progress lies concealed. We feel more faulty than at the beginning; we appear not only to commit faults more frequently, but to commit sins of which we formerly were not aware. Apparently a change for the worse has taken place within us. But in matter of fact we sin less frequently than before; it is only that we are more enlightened and see our sins more clearly than before. Many things now appear to us as wrong, which we formerly disregarded. The new faults which we discover in us are perhaps of very long standing, but our moral sense was too dull hitherto to perceive them. A pious and highly intelligent lady, Princess Gallitzin, became aware only at an advanced age that she was addicted to spiritual pride, nay, that this was her main fault. Yet anyone who reads her life can see that pride was in her blood, so to speak, from childhood. Undoubtedly it is thus also with many others. No man is in a position to say at all times whether he is better or worse than before. Others are better able to judge than we. Let us remember, moreover, that such comparisons have very little value. One thing is certain: we shall feel as long as we live that we are debtors to God, and we shall always have reasons to fight against

our faults, in order not to drift into the eternal abyss.

St. Bernard beautifully expresses the nature of our progress and our perfection by saying: "Our perfection does not consist in this, that we are perfect, but in the persistent endeavor to become perfect." This earnest, incessant, energetic endeavor should be found in all who go to confession frequently. They should never grow tired in their efforts to attain their goal, for: "As for him that conquereth, I will give him to sit with me upon my throne, as I myself conquered, and sat down with my Father on His throne." (Apoc. III, 21.)

CHAPTER XI

HOW OFTEN SHALL I GO TO CONFESSION?

THE confessor is often asked: How often shall I receive Holy Communion? But rarely a penitent asks how often he should go to confession. Most Catholics go to confessions whenever they wish to receive Communion. Few are aware that the frequency of confession is regulated by quite different principles than the frequency of Communion. The habit of going to confession as often as one wishes to go to Communion betrays a lack of understanding of the nature of both Sacraments. In this chapter we will treat of frequent confession according to principles deduced from the nature and purpose of confession as a means of spiritual progress.

What is meant by frequent confession? While the Holy Eucharist is the bread of life, the Sacrament of Penance is essentially a judicial proceeding. In this distinction we have the first means of gauging the notion of "frequent confession." While we need bread daily and therefore daily and frequent Communion almost coincide, a judicial proceeding, which

requires, besides the accused, a judge and a judgment seat, cannot be made an every-day occurrence; the necessary apparatus is too cumbersome, the formalities connected with it are too circumstantial. When we speak of frequent confession, therefore, we by no means mean daily confession. Barring special circumstances, weekly confession must be considered as very frequent. Here we have the topmost limit of frequent confession.

This limit may represent the practical ideal for certain classes of persons. Priests and religious, and some few seculars, may demand the privilege of weekly confession. But the question arises whether the faithful in general should be directed to this ideal, or whether weekly confession is not perhaps too much for them. The present trend of development seems to be in the direction of making weekly confession a common practice. Catholics of all ages and conditions go to confession in large numbers every week. But certain disadvantages have already begun to manifest themselves. The pressure upon the confessionals is steadily increasing; the priests in large city parishes are scarcely able to handle the crowds; the loss of time suffered by penitents in waiting for their turn is so considerable that many who stand in urgent need of confession come more rarely in proportion as others, who could easily do

without it, push forward. Confessors endeavor in various ways to remedy the evils flowing from this condition of affairs. Some instruct the penitents how to make a brief and precise accusation; others cut short the customary admonition or omit it altogether. But these are only half-measures. A certain city pastor, in whose parish the religious life is very flourishing, did not know what to do to lighten his own work and that of his curates in the confessional, so he declared from the pulpit: "From now on, barring certain exceptions, no one shall come to confession oftener than every other week." That was sensible advice. I also am of the opinion that the majority of the faithful should not go to confession more than once every two or three weeks.

The maximum of frequency is based, as we have seen, on the nature of confession as a judicial process. Its minimum is determined by its purpose. Frequent confession aims at a double purpose: first, to produce a state of greater purity in the soul and to preserve it in that state permanently; secondly to stimulate and keep alive the striving after improvement. Both of these purposes, it seems to me, cannot be permanently attained if a person confesses less often than once every four or five weeks. During this period so much "dust" accumulates on the soul that a high degree of purity is out of the ques-

tion. Moreover, resolutions having for their object only venial sins wear out, so to speak, after four or five weeks; they are used up and forgotten; hence a renewal or a change must necessarily be made. On the other hand, the effects of a good confession may well last for a month in serious-minded persons, so that in such cases a confession every four or five weeks may be called frequent.

Frequent confession, therefore, means at most once a week or at least every four or five weeks. Within these limits all who earnestly desire to make spiritual progress, should move. How often within these limits a particular person should go to confession, depends on his or her individual needs and disposition, and on the opportunities offered.

Above all frequency of confession depends on external opportunity. There are many Catholics who have no opportunity of confessing their sins often. Either there is no confessor available, or if there is one, there are so many penitents that one has no chance to approach him. Others live far away from the nearest church. Many, very many have no time. Many a pious man would like to go to confession frequently, but his working hours will not permit it. When he comes home from work, it is too late, or he is too tired, and on Sunday morning there is usually a large crowd. How many

mothers wish to go to confession often, but are prevented by their work at home and the care of their children. All these should, whenever it can be done, go to confession every four or five weeks. This most of them can do with a little good will. If it is not too far to church, not much time will be required for the reception of the Sacrament. Of course, those who are at leisure can take their time. I do not mean that they should spend hours in church on Saturday afternoon. One may frequently observe women who spend endless time in preparing for confession. This is an abuse! Have these women no work to do? Is there no one waiting for them at home? Let no one bring disrepute on Christian piety! Let no one give occasion for dissatisfaction or complaint by spending in devotional exercises hours which belong to the service of his or her fellowmen! Let me repeat, for the benefit of those who really have no time, that ten or fifteen minutes' preparation and ten minutes' thanksgiving will amply suffice for a devotional confession. Whoever cannot spare that much time, may make his preparation and thanksgiving at home. God will surely supply with His grace what human strength cannot perform. The less frequently a person is able to go to confession, the more care should he bestow on his purpose of amendment, both before and after confession. This

will recompense him somewhat for the loss of the advantages flowing from more frequent confession. But he should not permit himself to be deterred from going to Communion as often as possible. That one has not been to confession for two or three weeks is no reason why he should not go to Communion. Whom does Our Lord call more urgently to Holy Communion than those who suffer and are burdened? Do not His consoling words apply above all to them: "Come to Me all you that labor and are burdened, and I will refresh you." (Mt. XI, 28.)

A decisive factor in answering the question: How often shall I go to confession? is one's spiritual need. We may speak of a need of frequent confession in a twofold sense. One may need frequent confession because without it he is in danger of falling into mortal sin or suffering other serious damage to his soul. Or one may need frequent confession because he has a strong desire for the inestimable fruits thereof. Those in need of frequent confession in the former sense are: converts, whose spiritual life, after a long period of habitual sin, stands in need of special care; those who are frequently attacked by grievous temptations and whose only salvation is great zeal in doing good; those afflicted with serious faults, which they cannot overcome except by a frequent renewal of the purpose

of amendment; those that are led to perfection by extraordinary paths and are more exposed to the danger of going astray than are others. The need of frequent confession in the latter sense is always present when God's grace has aroused in the soul an ardent desire for penance, purity, and spiritual advancement.

Age and state of life also furnish certain indications how often one should go to confession.

Children—all but the very young—should, if possible, confess every two or three weeks. I have heard it said: "In such and such a place nearly everybody goes to Communion daily. Some go to confession often, others but rarely. Even children receive Communion every day, but seldom go to confession. What do you think of this?" I answer that children and young people need spiritual supervision and guidance, which can be given them only in the confessional. Adolescent youth in particular and the pupils of the higher grades, stand in urgent need of frequent confession, no matter how often they go to Communion. There is a twofold reason for this. First, they are at an age when the passions begin to awaken and a stern fight must be made for preserving virtue. It is of the greatest importance that no vice should strike root in the impressionable young heart. Secondly, at this period of

life the child begins to withdraw more and more from the influence of his parents and teachers and charges of his own development. On account of the awakening of powerful passions within him, the young man, therefore, stands more urgently in need of the art of self-education than anyone else, and he begins to practice this art independently only now. It is a difficult situation indeed, and Heaven only knows how much youthful innocence is lost in this critical period. Frequent confession helps wonderfully to weather the storms of adolescence. It cheers up the young man and urges him to fight the good fight with confidence and courage. It sustains him with the grace of the Sacrament in temptations. It quickly puts him back on his feet after a fall and preserves him from becoming inured in vice. And in proportion as it protects him from sin, it fosters all that is good in him, above all the necessary art of self-discipline. It teaches him to direct his thoughts and efforts to noble aims and urges him to be faithful in the performance of duty and conscientious on his own initiative. It trains him to prepare himself by the renunciation of minor for self-restraint in major things. It induces him to keep his wishes and desires free from contamination in accordance with the ideal of a Christian gentleman. Would that priests were more suc-

cessful in inducing the young to go to confession frequently! We should then have more sprightly and healthy young men whose blooming faces and bright eyes proclaim the joyousness of a faithfully preserved innocence.

The majority of the married and elderly people do not need weekly confession. For them it is enough if they confess every two, three or four weeks. This applies especially to fathers and mothers who have much work and many cares. Their educator is God. God-fearing parents educate themselves in their children. How deep-rooted, how enlightened is the piety of these simple folk! How pure are their sentiments, how honest their intentions, how large their views! How simple and strong is their zeal to comply with the will of God! Is it the seriousness of life that has schooled them in the faith? Did piety come to them with the dignity of parenthood, with the duty of educating their children? Who taught them to pray so devoutly? Who instructed them in the genuinely Christian art of making their life a continuous divine service? Who inspired them with heroic strength in following Christ? The Holy Ghost; He alone was their teacher, and in His school they learned more than they could have learned from all the books ever printed. Such persons would surely profit by weekly confession, and if time and oppor-

tunity permit, they should go to confession as often as they wish. However, there is no need of it, and it is quite sufficient if they go every two or three weeks. Whoever, with the aid of the Holy Ghost and by virtue of good habits acquired in the past, has progressed thus far in spiritual things, will continue to advance on the road to perfection.

How often one should confess depends in the last analysis on his or her interior disposition.

Frequent confession requires a disposition that makes confession easy. The mental labor involved is not great, but when certain defective dispositions exist, it may become an intolerable burden. To make frequent confession a pleasant and profitable task, demands sound judgment and a certain facility in entering into oneself, in other words, the gift of mental concentration. There must, furthermore, be no anxiety or fear. Those who, on account of a peculiar mental disposition, find confession very difficult, assume a different attitude towards frequent confession. Some develop a direct aversion for it in consequence of the agony which they undergo. It would be wrong to urge such persons, who would profit little by frequent confession anyhow, to go every week or fortnight. They may confess their sins whenever they feel strong enough to do so. Meantime they should endeavor to preserve

their purity of heart by the habitual use of other means of penance, and foster their zeal in doing good by frequent Communion. Instruction, prayer, and patience generally cause these difficulties to disappear, and sometimes one meets with cases in which such penitents have learned the art of confessing quite thoroughly. Others, who also lack this mental facility in confessing, nevertheless feel a strong urge to receive the Sacrament of Penance frequently. It is for the confessor to judge whether it is profitable or harmful for such persons to go to confession often.

It remains for us to discuss the question what moral dispositions are required for frequent confession. Broadly speaking, frequent requires no more than infrequent confession. He who has venial sins to confess must, first of all, have a true contrition and, secondly, be firmly resolved to avoid them. These conditions are substantially the same, whether a person confesses frequently or rarely. The only difference is that he who confesses every week must develop that contrition and that firm resolution into a permanent habit. It is not so much the circumstance that a person confesses frequently that requires a higher degree of penitential zeal, as the fact that he confesses his sins more in detail. The larger the number of venial sins of which he accuses

himself, and the smaller the faults which he confesses, the higher the sentiments necessary to elicit true contrition. For, to have true sorrow for small and very small faults, requires a high degree of spiritual enlightenment, strong charity, and a keenly developed sense of purity to brace oneself up to the firm resolution of declaring war on petty faults.

Whoever, therefore, has advanced no farther in the spiritual life than merely to avoid mortal sin, whoever is so lukewarm that he freely commits venial sins, and so indifferent that he continues in that state without the least desire for higher things, has not the necessary disposition for confession, much less for frequent devotional confession. Therefore, frequent confession and lukewarmness are mutually exclusive in the long run. Either frequent confession will put an end to lukewarmness, or lukewarmness will lead to an abuse of confession. However, we do not mean to advise the lukewarm to stay away from confession; on the contrary, they should confess their sins often, but do it well. They should overcome their lukewarmness by means of confession, and they will attain this end if they take care to put their good resolutions into practice.

It is a mistake, therefore, to maintain, as some do, that frequent confession is to be recommended

only to a few. Quite the contrary. For, on the one hand, monthly confession must be accounted as frequent, and on the other hand, there are many who are able to elicit the penitential acts necessary for frequent confession. Experience teaches that nearly all who succeed in overcoming mortal sin, with the help of grace at once proceed to resist also venial sin, at least the coarser kinds of it, as an injury to the soul. In many cases only those who are willing to avoid venial sins, at least to a certain extent, succeed in preserving themselves free from mortal sins; and the greater the struggles one has to sustain, the surer is it that one can work out his salvation solely by increased spiritual aspiration. To be exact—leaving mortal sin out of the question—I know of only one class of Christians who are not fit to confess often, and they are the very lukewarm, not those who commit many faults, but those who, completely imbued with the spirit and perversity of the world, are unconcerned about their accumulated venial sins. Where there is absolutely no reaction against venial sins, devotional confession, and above all frequent devotional confession, is impossible.

Whoever wishes to go to confession often and to receive this Sacrament of purification and renewal with real profit, is urgently advised to foster

an increasing desire for spiritual progress and to enkindle in himself frequently the fire of divine love. With this desire and this ardent charity aglow in the heart, there will never be a want of the necessary contrition or of a good and firm purpose of amendment. Lively faith will detect each and every fault, even the slightest, as an offense against God, and an ardent love of God will never cease to mourn over the wretchedness and the frailties which are the inseparable accompaniment of this earthly life.

In conclusion we may mention a decision of the S. Congregation of Indulgences, dated Feb. 14, 1906, which rules that those who receive Holy Communion daily or almost daily, may gain all plenary indulgences without being obliged to go to confession every week, or every two weeks, or even every month.

CHAPTER XII

THE FRUITS OF FREQUENT CONFESSION

"IT is the opinion of all truly pious persons that, whatever of sanctity, piety and fear of God has by the divine mercy been preserved in the Church to our time, must be ascribed in a great measure to confession, so that no one need be surprised that the enemy of the human race, in his efforts to destroy the Catholic faith, through the agency of the ministers of his wicked designs, assails with all his might the bulwark of Christian virtue." (Catechism of the Council of Trent, Pt. II, ch. V, qu. 32.)

Can there be a better recommendation for the frequent and devout reception of the Sacrament of Penance than this splendid encomium of its fruits, bestowed in a book backed by the authority of the Church? Indeed, there is no greater incitement to frequent confession than the consideration of the fruits which this Sacrament will produce.

We have already discussed the effects of occasional confession. That which occasional confession produces in the soul for a moment, or for a short time, is increased and by dint of incessant repeti-

tion becomes a permanent state by frequent confession. From this we may conclude how valuable are the results of the frequent and devout reception of the Sacrament of Penance.

Occasional confession blots out all stains of venial sin and renews in the soul the brightness of supernatural purity. Frequent confession, made in a penitential spirit, renders this happy condition permanent, especially when, during the short intervals, fervent charity operates energetically in enforcing the good resolutions formed by the penitent. Is there a greater happiness than to feel that the soul is uninterruptedly free from serious contamination? Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God! The stain of guilt, in conjunction with voluntary attachment to sin, is the sole cause which prevents Our Divine Saviour from bestowing His rich graces and gifts upon the souls so ardently loved by Him.

Occasional confession of merely venial sins increases sanctifying grace. Frequent confession is, therefore, a rich source of holiness and love of God.

Occasional confession cures the soul of the germs of infection which have accumulated in the soul in consequence of its propensity to evil. Frequent confession bestows on the soul vigor, joy, and facility in the service of God.

Occasional confession remits, at least in part, the temporal punishments due to sin. Frequent confession considerably reduces the measure of our guilt and shortens the duration and severity of our term in Purgatory.

The effects of confession thus far enumerated refer in the main to reparation for the sins of the past; let us take a look at those that refer to the future reformation of the soul.

Occasional confession, by means of the examination of conscience, sharpens our discernment in all that is pleasing or displeasing to God. By means of contrition it reforms our heart, so that we begin to fear and despise also venial faults; it arouses our attention; it stirs our will to serious moral efforts. In addition to all this it confers the "special grace" of the Sacrament of Penance, by which, when the opportunity of carrying out our good resolution has come, the mind is aroused and the will strengthened for the inevitable struggle.

From this it follows that the first and best fruit of frequent confession is a great tenderness of conscience, a lively detestation of all that offends God, a constant attention to every disorderly inclination in order to resist its first movements, and persevering faithfulness in making an act of contrition after every sin. The refinement of the moral sense is so

closely bound up with the nature of penance, and with the graces of the Sacrament, that it is inseparable from frequent and contrite confession, and must be expected in those who confess often—if not at once, at least after some practice; if not in full measure, at least with gradually increasing perfection. On account of the fickleness of human nature we must constantly reckon with the fact that periods of ascent and descent are sure to come, that at times watchfulness will give way to carelessness. But it is impossible that scrupulousness, dullness, and apathy of conscience, in short, neglect of the interior life, should become a permanent state of the soul if confession is made frequently and with a contrite heart. Lukewarmness and frequent confession cannot permanently co-exist; if the former is a lasting condition, one has some reason to be alarmed about one's confessions.

From the frequent renewal of contrition and purpose of amendment and from the frequent reception of the "special graces" of the Sacrament, there follows as the second fruit of frequent confession earnest warfare against the sources of venial sins, namely, evil propensities and bad habits. This second fruit has an advantage over the first in that it can be more easily ascertained. The combat with sin consists in a series of actions before and after temp-

tation, about which the soul cannot easily deceive itself. Is this fruit, like the former, also necessarily connected with frequent and worthy confessions?

A good deed frequently repeated produces a good habit; noble affections often renewed create a noble mentality. Therefore we said above that the refinement of our moral sense is inseparably connected with frequent and worthy confession. Hence we may also say that the frequent acts of contrition and the constantly renewed purpose of amendment and the sacramental graces so often received must in course of time move the soul to make special efforts to resist sin. I say, "in course of time"; for even the most fervent resolution will occasionally be forgotten when adverse circumstances arise, sometimes immediately after confession. Hence, when no effort is made to carry out the good resolution, or when the effort to do so loses much of its vigor in a few days, this need not surprise us. It is simply a result of human fickleness. With a sincere good-will it is not likely, as a rule, that we shall forget our good resolutions immediately after confession, or that we shall fail utterly to employ the preventive, preservative, and expiatory means at our command. The warfare against the sins confessed is one of the effects of frequent confession

which we may surely expect, if not at once, at least in the long run, and its total absence in the penitent would be a sign of defective repentance.

Finally, the ever increasing solicitude of spiritual striving and honest endeavor will surely produce also the third fruit of frequent confession, namely, preservation from the sins confessed, extermination of evil habits, and real spiritual progress. For how could so many graces, given to us to help us in striving after improvement, remain absolutely sterile?

There is no need of emphasizing this truth, for it is quite evident. And yet we sometimes hear people say that devotional confession has for its sole purpose to preserve a man from mortal sin. This opinion is false. St. Thomas says: "Whoever does penance for venial sins, must have the intention of reducing the number of his sins, else he will be in danger of slipping back, because he gives up the desire to go ahead." [1] But if the desire for moral improvement in matters pertaining to venial sin is an indispensable condition of penance, then real progress is one of its fruits. True, preservation from mortal sin is an effect of frequent devotional confession, and there are many who owe their perseverance in goodness to this practice. But we are

[1] *Summa Theol.*, 3a, qu. 87, art. I.

not justified in drawing the conclusion that this is the special and sole purpose of confessing venial sins. To cause the soul to persevere in the state of grace is, in the last analysis, the common aim of all the Sacraments, of all graces, of all our endeavors, even of the Evangelical Counsels. Nevertheless all these things also have a special task, and their ultimate purpose, perseverance in goodness, can only be attained by earnestly striving for the special object in each individual case. Thus, in devotional confession, whoever ceases to long for the fruit of amendment, runs the risk of sliding back into danger, which in many cases means a relapse into mortal sin.

We must, therefore, cling to the conclusion that amendment must be a fruit of frequent confession. However, we must, in this respect, expect neither too much nor too little.

We must not expect that devotional confession, no matter how frequent and fervent, will infallibly preserve us from relapsing into the sins we have confessed, or that it will keep us in a state of sinlessness. There is no sinlessness for man in this life. Even the saints (aside from the Blessed Virgin Mary) have not succeeded in avoiding all faults, in spite of frequent and most earnest confessions. Christ said to St. Gertrude when she asked Him to

free her of a certain fault: "But why do you desire that I shall be deprived of that honor, and *you* of the reward which you gain as often as you become aware of this or a similar fault and resolve to be on guard against it in future? For as often as anyone for the love of Me endeavors to combat his faults, he renders Me as much honor and fidelity as the soldier, who meets the enemy in battle and conquers him with a strong hand, honors his commander."

On the other hand we must not expect too little from frequent and contrite confession. Confession made frequently for the purpose of blotting out venial sins will preserve us from many faults into which we should otherwise fall. There will surely be an improvement, at least in this sense that we shall be better with confession than without it. For it can hardly be presumed that, fortified by grace, the combat of our will with our perverse inclinations, which necessarily follows upon frequent confession, must always and regularly end in a defeat of the will. The sacramental grace, received so frequently and with such penitential fervor, will, therefore, bear fruit in a lessening of our faults; we shall sin less frequently and less grievously.

This effect will not always be tantamount to an absolute diminution of the number of our faults in

the sense that we shall now sin less frequently than before. We shall be more careful in leading a devout life. But the increase or diminution in the number of our transgressions depends not only on our increased vigilance, but also on many other circumstances. And because our inclinations have grown stronger, or our environment more seductive, it may happen that the number of our transgressions increases, although our moral endeavors have grown more earnest. Whoever has lived with amiable people, and later fallen into disagreeable company, may not be aware of any diminution of his faults against brotherly love despite the fact that he now fights these faults more earnestly than before. The apparent retrogression here may conceal real progress. We must also bear in mind that the increase of our faults after a long and pious use of the Sacrament of Penance often means nothing else but a growing acuteness which enables the soul to discover faults where it formerly saw none, although as a matter of fact there were many more, and more obvious than now.

However, the circumstances under which the will has to struggle with the danger of a relapse do not always grow worse, and in the end we shall find that the number of our faults will gradually diminish, that we shall lay aside one or the other evil

habit, that we shall be more faithful in performing our duties and more careful in controlling the propensities of our heart. Let there be no limit to this progress. "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after justice, for they shall have their fill." Hence, let us rejoice when, at the beginning of our conversion—this expression is taken from the *Following of Christ*—our excessive negligences and transgressions rapidly diminish. Nor let us be surprised if the tenacious persistence of the remaining faults increases in the same measure as their number decreases. For there is a limit to our ability, and the grace of God always leaves in us so much of infirmity that virtue finds plenty of occasion for humiliation. Thomas à Kempis expresses the idea that, if we were to rid ourselves of one fault each year, we should soon attain to high perfection. Did the pious author fully realize the meaning of the phrase: "If we should rid ourselves of one fault each year"? I am of the opinion that he who has completely overcome at least *one* of his faults during his life-time, has performed a very great work. Frequent devotional confessions, made in a truly penitential spirit, may, in conjunction with frequent Communion, obtain for us this grand conquest.

It is not difficult to judge whether frequent con-

fession produces more or less fruit in a soul; yet we should beware of speaking of the total sterility of confession in certain cases.

We cannot speak of sterile confessions in a soul that honestly tries to walk along the right path with care and deliberation, even though she may stumble frequently. We cannot speak of sterile confessions in a soul that, while frequently relapsing into habitual faults, struggles earnestly against evil. We cannot speak of sterile confessions in a soul that has frequent relapses, yet is more and more pained by them. We cannot speak of sterile confessions in a soul that, though it makes no progress in self-discipline, yet amid many and serious temptations preserves itself free from mortal sin. Nor should we even speak lightly of sterile confessions when the number of venial sins constantly remains considerable, nay perhaps even shows an increase, if it is certain that this deterioration must not be attributed to growing negligence.

On the other hand, there *is* danger of sterility if, in spite of frequent confessions, a soul never makes an earnest effort to avoid the sins confessed, if the increasing number of transgressions is to be attributed to neglect of the spiritual life, if the ordinary result of so many confessions is to make one

careful for a few hours after confession, only to fall back into habitual indifference. If this is the true state of a soul, she should seriously ask herself how it is that she does penance for her sins so often and nevertheless does not change her behavior, that the sorrow and detestation of sin which she claims to feel does not lead to resistance, that resolutions a hundred times renewed, sincere resolutions as she maintains, invariably go up in smoke! And if she finds no other explanation for this sad phenomenon than the perfunctory character of her repentance, she should enter into herself and make a thorough change in her manner of receiving the Sacrament of Penance.

By no means ought it to be a matter of indifference to us whether we draw little or much fruit from our confessions. The good pleasure of Our Saviour, grace, happiness, security: all these treasures we acquire in proportion as we rid our soul of venial sins, as we purify the inclinations of our heart and direct them solely to God and His interests. Who will not be filled with an ardent longing for perfect purity at the sight of all the glorious effects which Christ by His boundless abasement has produced in the hearts of the saints, because He found them pure and ready? When we go to confession, therefore, let us aim high. Let us have a sincere desire to grow

in Christ and to attain to maturity and manliness in Him; then frequent confession, in union with daily Communion, will become for us a source of many blessings and great happiness.

CHAPTER XIII

FREQUENT CONFESSION IN ITS RELATION TO DAILY COMMUNION

OUR spiritual life is like a tree, growing in the field of redemption, anchored with thousands of roots in the fertile soil of Christ's grace. Two of these roots are especially strong, deep-seated, and wide-spreading. They are the main channels of concentration for the thousands of rootlets which the tree has sent into the ground and through which it absorbs moisture and strength. They are the perennial source of the life-giving sap that incessantly courses through the trunk, the branches, and the foliage. They afford the tree a firm hold when the storms of wild passions play in its crown. These main sources of the spiritual life of mankind are the Sacrament of Penance and the Holy Eucharist. Wherever a section of God's earthly garden, the Church, looks fresh and flourishes here on earth, it is owing to the fact that these two Sacraments are received with fervor and devotion. And conversely, where their reception is slack, the spiritual life also

withers and dies. Around these two Sacraments, as around two natural centers, is grouped the entire moral and religious life of humanity. They are the highest points in our wrestling for detachment from sin, the world and the flesh. In them culminates our striving to be united with God. Our entire supernatural life finds in them a resumé of and an elevation into the divine. Rays of heavenly light and warmth proceed from them towards the borderland of our soul-life, stimulating, refreshing and fructifying it everywhere. The worthy reception of Penance and Holy Communion produces moments of the most vigorous spiritual life and experience, in the course of which the soul longingly and lovingly lifts herself up to the fountainhead of holiness and bliss, and the eternal and merciful Love benignly inclines towards the creature. The importance of frequent confession and frequent Communion for the spiritual life is too great to be overlooked by any Christian.

Frequent confession and frequent Communion in some way or another plainly belong together. True, they are not bound by a necessary union; this is manifest from the penitential discipline of the primitive Church. But the history of Christian asceticism and our daily experience teach that confession and Communion will develop their greatest

efficacy only when they are placed in proper relation to each other. They supplement and fructify each other. In matter of fact we now-a-days seldom meet a Christian who receives Holy Communion frequently without going to confession often. Since the Council of Trent all zealous promoters of frequent Communion have also insisted on frequent confession. Therefore we cannot but warn against the conduct of those who, though receiving Communion daily, put off their confession for months without good reason. They do not, of course, commit a sin by acting thus, but, aside from the intrinsic value of confession, they deprive themselves of an excellent means of always receiving their Eucharistic Saviour with a well prepared heart.

Confession and Communion, frequent confession and frequent Communion, to a certain extent belong together. On the other hand we must be careful not to over-emphasize the interdependence existing between them. Remember that Holy Communion is not necessarily bound up with confession, and that we may go to confession independently of any thought of Holy Communion, merely for the purposes peculiar to that Sacrament.

This truth is not properly appreciated by those who think that confession is a necessary preparation for Communion and that no one should approach

the Lord's Table without first having cleared his conscience by receiving the priestly absolution immediately before or at least on the preceding day. There are still too many Christians who cannot rid themselves of this mistaken idea. Sometimes confession before Communion is necessary; sometimes it must be urgently recommended, and sometimes it may be left to the discretion of the individual. Confession is strictly necessary before Communion when one is conscious of a mortal sin not yet obliterated by absolution. Confession before Communion is recommended to those who, while not conscious of a mortal sin, receive the Sacraments only at long intervals and meanwhile lead a lukewarm and careless life. Strictly speaking, confession is not necessary for these. Whoever goes to confession frequently, say, every three or four weeks, and is not conscious of any mortal sin, may receive Holy Communion at any time.

Venial sins need not be confessed before Communion. When the Jansenists in the seventeenth century maintained that "He who claims the right to receive Communion before having done penance, commits a sacrilege," Pope Alexander VIII condemned this proposition on the ground that it could be applied also to venial sins. The Church, therefore, concedes to those who are guilty only of venial

sins, the right to receive Communion before they have confessed. They can blot out their venial sins without confession. Nor is it a sin, either mortal or venial, to receive Communion in a state of venial sin. A recent book on Moral Theology maintaining the contrary proposition is decidedly in error. Even voluntary attachment to a venial sin is no impediment to worthy Communion. According to the decree of Pope Pius X on daily Communion the cessation of this attachment should be a *fruit* of daily Communion. But how is this possible if we cannot go to Communion with such an attachment, without committing a new venial sin? Venial sin and voluntary attachment to venial sin diminish, it is true, the graces of Communion, but they do not prevent them. Penance and confession of venial sins before Communion are, therefore, not superfluous, but neither are they necessary.

Unfortunately there are still Christians who cannot rid themselves of Jansenistic prejudice and would not dare to receive Communion without previously going to confession. There are still many souls who in every respect are worthy and called to realize the ideal of daily Communion according to the wish of the Church. They try hard to increase the love of God in their hearts. They pray much, they labor and walk in the presence of God with a

pure intention. They strive for what is best and take great pains to imitate faithfully the virtues of Our Divine Redeemer. They are well aware that they are not without faults. But according to their own opinion and the judgment of their confessor they never, or hardly ever, commit a mortal sin. They are greatly attracted to the Blessed Sacrament. Christ's presence in the tabernacle is their greatest joy. They attend Mass daily and make frequent visits to the church. They would like to go to Communion daily, but are prevented from doing so by invincible prejudices. Brought up in a semi-Jansenistic atmosphere, they do not dare to approach the holy table without previous confession, and since for some reason or other they cannot go to confession frequently, they remain away from Holy Communion for a long time and hunger and thirst for the Bread of Heaven for the sole reason that they still labor under the effect of certain sermons of a former age, in which exaggerated conditions were exacted from those who wished to go to Communion frequently or daily. These are remnants of the old Jansenistic spirit surviving in the midst of the Catholic people. Let us lay aside these errors and rid ourselves of such un-Catholic sentiments. Whoever does not dare to approach the table of the Lord without previously going to confession, converts the most amiable in-

tentions of Our Divine Saviour into their contrary and makes of confession, which was intended to be a road to Christ, an obstacle that separates us from Him.

Even more numerous, perhaps, than the Christians who do not dare to receive Holy Communion without previous confession, are those who look upon confession merely as a preparation for Communion, and hence place the former in undue dependence on the latter. This also is a serious mistake. These penitents, in going to confession, aim at nothing else but to cleanse their souls as much as possible from every sin as a preparation for Communion. In doing so they forget the ulterior purpose of penance as a means of combatting repented faults—a matter which is surely also an essential part of true repentance. This idea involves a serious and momentous misconception of the true significance and proper purpose the Sacrament of Penance, which thus ceases to be a school of true reform and sinks from the level of a high-school of self-education for Christ to that of a weekly house-cleaning process. Where such a one-sided view is held, it must come to pass that the fruits of confession grow less. Whoever, in going to confession, limits his attention to the approaching Communion and loses sight of the future, will not

only make very imperfect resolutions, but also logically arrive at a stage where he no longer thinks of carrying them out as soon as holy Communion is over, and make no further efforts to correct his faults. When going to confession we must never forget the proper purpose of penance, namely, to blot out past sins and to preserve us from future sins. Confession may indeed be made to serve as a preparation for holy Communion; but above all it must attain its own purposes. And we may safely say that it will prepare the soul all the better for the coming of Our Lord, the more strenuously it makes for its own goal. This will be recognized as soon as we examine more closely in what the preparatory value of confession in regard to holy Communion consists. This value may be stated as follows: A good confession prepares the soul to receive the graces of holy Communion in a richer measure and fructifies the grace received in holy Communion more abundantly for the moral life.

The principal grace effected by holy Communion, the one which complements and crowns all the other graces, is the union of the sanctified soul with Christ in charity, the consolidation and deepening of the union of love existing between Christ and the soul; for Our Lord says: "He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood, remains in Me and I in him." To

partake of this effect in a greater measure, it will not suffice to approach the holy table in the state of sanctifying grace; the soul must, moreover, remove all obstacles that impede her perfect union with Christ and seek to excite in herself those sentiments and affections, by means of which she, so to speak, goes to meet Christ to consummate that perfect union of love.

We know, of course, what it is that hinders this union of love with Christ. It is venial sin, it is the voluntary sinful propensities of our heart. And we also know which are the sentiments that, so to speak, prepare our soul for that union. They are, before Communion, the acts of desire and longing for Christ and, during Communion, the acts of adoration, love, and confident attachment to Christ. Hence it is plain how confession co-operates in preparing our hearts for the reception of Christ in the Holy Eucharist.

If a clean heart, detached from sin and inclination to sin, is the first condition of a perfect Communion, is it not frequent confession that makes the heart clean? By means of the penitential spirit and of a sincere intention of doing penance, of self-humiliation and self-accusation, the zealous soul in Confession wipes out the last stain which prevents Our Lord from regarding her with perfect com-

placency. By means of a serious purpose of amendment, by courageous resolutions, she separates herself from the propensities of the heart which still draw her toward evil; finally, by means of the priestly absolution the wedding garment, which she received in Baptism in honor of her gracious union with the Bridegroom, shines forth with renewed splendor. Ah, how dearly Our Lord loves this splendor of stainless purity in a soul! How He is attracted by this bright and luminous creature, the fruit of His sacred blood, man's most beautiful ornament! Whenever Our Lord enters into a heart and finds this luminous brightness, He loves to abide there, to speak to the soul as a friend, to confer His graces lavishly, and to give Himself to the soul in the fulness of His inspirations and consolations. On the other hand, a clean heart permits the soul to look up to God with holy confidence and to approach Him with loving devotion. "Blessed are the clean of heart, for they shall see God." Such a clean heart is the result of a good confession of the kind with which we have been dealing in this book. Indeed, it is the loveliest among its fruits.

As regards the affections with which the soul should go to meet her Lord and loving Redeemer, it is a well-known fact that the heart more easily rises

to humility, confidence, longing, love and gratitude, after renewing itself in a sincere confession, than by going to Communion without confession. Theologians call venial sins the trammels of love, which impede its movements and make its actions more difficult. Confession breaks these fetters and increases love. And what is better adapted to strengthen in us the sentiments of humility than frequent confession, which so effectively brings home to us the extent of our weakness? In confession we realize the greatness of God's mercies and His love for us, and gratitude moves our hearts towards Him, who so faithfully watched over us, so indulgently bore with our failings, so mercifully attracted us to Himself. Nothing in fact is so well adapted to give us an insight into God's guidance and dispensations, into His merciful intentions regarding our soul, as the frequent and intelligent use of confession *qua* means of spiritual progress. By it we learn to understand many things about ourselves which appeared to us an insoluble enigma, but which we learn to appreciate as a divine dispensation for our welfare. A feeling of firm confidence in God fills the heart after such perceptions, and the resolution to place our life and efforts for time and eternity, trustfully into the hands of Providence, is certainly adapted to bring the soul closer

to Christ, to prepare it for the union of love in holy Communion.

After Communion, confession secures the conscientious use of the graces received. The Holy Eucharist confers on the soul strength, enthusiasm, and a willingness to make sacrifices. These graces often remain unused, because there is no goal towards which they are enlisted. A worthy confession gives them such a goal in the form of a definite, well-considered purpose of amendment.

The masters of the spiritual life exhort us to bring our prayer into the closest possible touch with our daily life, particularly with all that pertains to our spiritual progress. The intimate union between life and prayer, endeavor and petition, benefits both of these activities. The longing and striving gives substance and warmth to prayer; prayer procures grace, fresh efforts, new strength, and perseverance. Whenever an earnest striving after virtue is coupled with constant and fervent prayer, the fervor of the affections which accumulates in the heart during meditation is not wasted, as it so often is with persons whose spiritual life is not well regulated, and the grace acquired by prayer is not in danger of remaining an uninvested capital.

Let us apply these truths to confession and Communion. As Communion is the zenith of our life of

prayer, so confession, when made with due understanding, is the strongest expression of our moral striving. The serious efforts inspired by confession should give to our Communions a still richer content and still greater fervor. Holy Communion should complete what confession has begun. But how? Let us go to Communion with the intention of realizing what, in our most recent good resolution, we have set up as our special goal. Let us employ the fervent love that glows in our heart during holy Communion by promising with renewed ardor that we will keep the good resolutions we have made in confession. Finally, let us employ all the strength gained in holy Communion in keeping our good resolutions. Thus holy Communion will become fruitful for our moral life. The objection that daily Communion is mere sentimental piety and has no practical significance, will then no longer be raised. On the contrary, we shall find in this pious practice new strength to enable us to persevere in our endeavors and to keep our good resolutions.

Everyone who has seriously taken in hand the great task of training himself for Christ, will realize that he has undertaken a great and difficult work and that, in order to attain his goal, he must exert himself to the utmost and make use of every available means. Every confession and every Communion

must be employed for this purpose. Let us renew our effort in every confession; let us strengthen and revivify it in every holy Communion! Let us resolutely walk in the path of perfect charity which God has shown us, the path of constant upward striving and yearning for God. If we receive these two great Sacraments frequently with fervor and due understanding, we shall not be disappointed or discouraged. Temporary disappointments are, of course, inevitable. They are necessary in order that we may not forget our misery too soon, and that we may place our trust not in ourselves, but in God. But when we do fall, we shall not remain lying on the ground without hope and strength, but resolutely rise again and continue our forward and upward course.

And when the end finally comes, and we have to depart from this world, we shall be able to look back upon a life which, though it was not an uninterrupted ascent, as we dreamed in the days of our youth, will exhibit itself to our eyes as an unbroken chain of efforts to attain perfection. And this will be no disappointment. Perhaps we shall then, at the sight of our failings, remember the words of a great spiritual writer, that "man's perfection does not consist in being perfect, but in constantly striving to be perfect."

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